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**The stakes are far too high for America to sit on the sidelines**  
**By Lawrence Haas**

WASHINGTON – The Arab Spring has brought hope to millions across the Middle East and North Africa, but whether its ultimate outcome is a more democratic region or just a new set of autocrats to replace the old remains a very open question.

For the United States, the stakes could hardly be higher. A more democratic region will mean fewer threats to U.S. interests, fewer states that sponsor terrorism and more trade and investment for U.S. businesses.

America cannot dictate the future of this economically backward and politically calcified region, but it retains enormous influence to help shape events – as witnessed by the vital protection that the U.S. military gave to Libya’s rebels, helping them topple longtime strongman Moammar Gadhafi.

Libya is key to the region’s future. It sits between Tunisia and Egypt, whose futures in the aftermath of uprisings remain in doubt, and its successful transition to democracy would encourage democratic forces elsewhere.

For Libya, President Obama should use his bully pulpit to support democratic forces; allocate money and deploy people for democracy-building that would include the development of civil society, political parties, elections and independent media; and encourage private institutions to supplement those efforts.

Such efforts have been a staple of U.S. foreign policy at least since World War II and – while Washington has made its share of mistakes over the ensuing decades – its efforts have undeniably helped to protect and promote freedom and democracy, making the world a safer and more prosperous place.

Most dramatically, the United States protected democracy in Western Europe after World War II by rescuing its economy through the Marshall Plan; promoted democracy by winning the Cold War and freeing Eastern Europe to build a democratic future; and empowered democratic forces by bringing peace to the Balkans in the 1990s.

Recently, Washington has played an important role in the Arab Spring, providing funds and training for some of its leaders, according to numerous news accounts.

In Egypt, Bashem Fathy learned how to organize and build coalitions at a 2008 technology conference that the State Department sponsored with leading technology companies, while Bassem Samir learned about political organization, new media and other skills through U.S. funded programs.

All told, more than 10,000 Egyptians have participated in democracy and governance programs that were funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Individuals and groups in other countries of the region received money and training from the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute – both of which are funded by the quasi-governmental National Endowment for Democracy – and from Freedom House, a private non-profit organization.

Critics often caution against U.S. assistance, arguing that it enables the government in power to paint the democratic activists as U.S. spies or lackeys – thus undercutting the very democracy-building efforts that it seeks to assist.

For decades, however, democratic activists who were trying to topple or transform authoritarian regimes across the world have consistently urged stronger U.S. help and later thanked Washington for its efforts.

They include Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov and Natan Sharansky in the Soviet Union; Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel in Eastern Europe; and, more recently, Saad Eddin Ibrahim in Egypt, Yang Jianli in China, Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, and Garry Kasparov in Russia.

New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristoff, who visited Tripoli after Gadhafi's downfall, began his Aug. 31 column this way: "Americans are not often heroes in the Arab world, but as nonstop celebrations unfold here in the Libyan capital I keep running into ordinary people who learn where I'm from and then fervently repeat variants of the same phrase: 'Thank you, America!'"

Yes, America helped the rebels topple Gadhafi and it can help bring democracy to Libya. For its own sake and the world's, it surely should try.