OPINION

Obama took only Mideast path available

BY TRUDY RUBIN
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There's been a lot of criticism of President Barack Obama for being too slow to support the Mideast's popular uprisings, especially in Libya.

"Feeble," "incoherent" and "not showing leadership" are some of the complaints I get from readers from both sides of the political spectrum. At moments, I've felt the same: The White House's Mideast team is weak, his "peace process" diplomacy has failed, his support of pro-democracy rebels is conflicted.

Yet, after reflecting on a recent visit to Egypt and conversations with experts in the region, I've concluded that no U.S. administration could have acted more decisively to aid Arab rebels. Any president would have been constricted by the same factors Obama faced.

Let's start with Libya, where Obama hesitated for weeks to intervene, but has now agreed to a U.N.-backed no-fly zone that aims to stop Col. Moammar Gadhafi from slaughtering his own people.

In deciding how to act, Obama was haunted by the legacy of the Iraq War. That ill-conceived conflict and failed occupation turned the entire Middle East, including democrats, against U.S. interventions. Egyptian rebel leaders made that point to me over and over. Imposing democracy from above, a la Iraq, is out.

So unilateral U.S. intervention in Libya was out of the question. Moreover, the Pentagon strongly opposed intervention in another Muslim country. U.S. generals feared it would take ground forces to get rid of Gadhafi.

Only after the Arab League endorsed a no-fly zone March 12 (and called for United Nations support) could the White House press for a vote by the U.N. Security Council. The vote meant — in theory, at least — that Arab countries could provide cover for action by France and Britain, with the United States in a supporting role. Even so, had Gadhafi not been on the verge of committing large-scale atrocities against civilians in full view of the world, Obama might not have concurred.

However, the Libya story is but a tragic sideshow. The fate of the region will turn on the results of democratic experiments in Egypt and events in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

The Obama-ites were slow to support Egyptian rebels, but that may have been a godsend. Much of Egypt's newfound pride lies with the fact that its rebels made their revolution on their own.

Now is the moment when U.S. officials should back democratic Egyptians (and Tunisians) in their push for fair elections and an open constitutional process. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who just visited both countries, seems to get it. But in their eagerness to avoid interference in Egypt's politics, U.S. officials may be taking an approach that's too hands-off.

The president's ambivalence has also stemmed, however, from the fact that we have sharply conflicting interests in the region. In theory, we back political reform in the Middle East, in the hope that Arab states can build democratic institutions in the long run. If they succeed, terrorists may find less fertile ground in the region.

Yet in the short run, the United States still faces crucial security threats from Iran and from Islamist terrorists. Our autocratic Arab allies helped us fight these threats. Their demise is likely to create instability in coming months or years that will enable those threats to increase.

This conflict underlay the slow support for change in Egypt. Hosni Mubarak's intelligence service was aggressive in pursuit of Islamist terrorists, and he was a key Sunni ally in containing Shiite Tehran. In the new Egypt (and Tunisia, and Libya, if Gadhafi falls), intelligence services will be curbed. This is a good thing, as the secret police repressed their own people. But it will also make it easier for terrorist networks to regroup in the region.

At least in Egypt, the White House can still rely on a close relationship with the army, which will remain a power center for the foreseeable future. In the Arabian Peninsula and the gulf, however, the democracy-vs.-security conflict makes it almost impossible to shape a coherent policy.

Gulf rulers like Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah want Obama to forget about democracy and focus on security. Such a choice seemed possible in the last decade: George W. Bush promoted Mideast democracy in his first term; then, when that backfired, he emphasized Mideast security in his second term. But that choice is not possible now.

The administration has tried, unsuccessfully, to encourage the president of Yemen to usher in peaceful democratic change. Neither ruler nor rebels seem able to make the necessary compromises, which means U.S. officials probably can't save Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yet if he falls, this country, just below Saudi Arabia, may relapse into tribal warfare. This would make it easier for al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula to flourish.

In Bahrain, the revolt of a largely Shiite population against its Sunni rulers presents the greatest danger to U.S. interests. This island kingdom is connected by a causeway to Saudi Arabia, whose eastern oil region is dominated by its Shiite minority. The Saudis fear that if Bahrain's rulers fall, Iran will have the perfect base from which to push Saudi Shiites to rebel.

Last week, over Obama's objections, the Saudi monarch sent troops across the causeway to help crush Bahrain's rebels. He won't listen when U.S. officials urge him (and Bahrain's ruler) to give more representation to their Shiites. Obama's team says this will head off trouble; Abdullah believes it will create more.

The Saudis think Obama is too strong on democracy and weak on security. Obama's critics slam him for being too weak on democracy — or on security. Few realize he is caught in a historical bind that requires him to be strong on both, even though the two contradict each other — at least in the short term. Bush couldn't resolve that contradiction; Obama has no choice but to try.

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Tillman still helping the servicemembers he admired

BY BRIG. GEN. KEVIN RYAN (RETIRED)

You think you know the Pat Tillman story, but you don't.

For most people, the story of Pat Tillman, the former professional football star who joined the Army after the Sept. 11 attacks, ends with his tragic death and the ensuing controversy surrounding the Army's handling of it. But for those who know Marie Tillman, Pat's wife, and the Pat Tillman Foundation, the story does not end there. It continues in the same way it started — in selfless service to others.

Following Pat's death in 2004, his family and friends established the Pat Tillman Foundation, which Marie heads today. You probably have not heard of the Pat Tillman Foundation or what it does, because Marie and her small team don't have a marketing budget. They publicize by word of mouth and through a small website.

The mission of the Pat Tillman Foundation is to invest in veterans and their families through education and community. Under Marie's leadership, the foundation raises money to help servicemembers and their families pay college education costs that are not covered by government programs. The money, available to any serving or veteran servicemember and his or her family, can often mean the difference between pursuing a college degree or not. The scholarships are, in part, needs-based and can be used to cover whatever unmet costs the recipient has: tuition, books, housing, child care and so on.

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Marie Tillman, widow of U.S. Army Ranger Pat Tillman, speaks with Len Cotton of Dardanelle, Ark., whose son is an Army Ranger, after she spoke at the University of Arkansas' Clinton School of Public Service in Little Rock in 2007.

To date, the Pat Tillman Foundation has pledged more than $1.3 million in scholarship funds to 111 Tillman Military Scholars attending 46 universities in 28 states. At a time when veteran jobless rates are high, a degree is indispensable.

But as impressive as the foundation's work is, the real inspiration comes from the personal example set by Marie Tillman. Marie and Pat were high school sweethearts in northern California. After college they settled in Arizona, where Pat played safety for the Arizona Cardinals. Their life was, by Marie's account, blessed and happy. When Pat decided after Sept. 11 that he would quit football and join the Army to fight, Marie was concerned but supportive — like most other Army wives.

When Pat was killed in Afghanistan, Marie was crushed, and the publicity and controversy that descended on her afterward only compounded her sorrow. No one would have blamed her if she had walked away from the Army and everything that reminded her of their time in the military. But she did not. I got to hear why when Marie recently visited with some of her foundation's Tillman Military Scholars at Harvard.

Speaking at Harvard's faculty club, Marie described her personal journey through the phases of grief, anger and depression with which so many other spouses and families are acquainted. She explained to our group of veterans in the packed room that she finally decided, after exhaustive searching, that she wanted to return to the time in her life when she was the happiest.

When was that? "It was when Pat and I joined the Army."

It was a stunning statement. Of all the groups and friends from her past to whom she could have attached herself after Pat's death, Marie chose the servicemembers and their families. Although the foundation bears Pat Tillman's name, Marie explains that their work is not really about Pat or her — it's about the servicemembers who return home and their families. She finds her joy in helping those who made it back.

In all my years in the Army or since, I have not seen greater selflessness or loyalty to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. Marie reminds us what the Pat Tillman story is really about.

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