

PolicyWatch #1751

From Caution to Boldness: U.S. Policy toward Egypt

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February 3, 2011

On February 2, 2011, Robert Satloff, J. Scott Carpenter, Dina Guirguis, and David Schenker addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. The following is an edited version of Dr. Satloff's opening remarks and responses to questions; a summary of the other presentations will be published separately.

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As the situation in Egypt continues to unfold, U.S. policy has evolved with breathtaking speed. Just last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the Mubarak regime was stable, but by Tuesday evening, President Obama was making the remarkable statement that Egypt's transition needs to begin "now." This is not only the most serious foreign policy challenge to this U.S. administration, but also one in a list of unforeseen and improbable challenges. Unlike scenarios involving, for example, a North Korean provocation against the South or even a catastrophic terrorist attack -- for which the United States plans and prepares -- the swift demise of Hosni Mubarak's presidency, along with the virtual disappearance of the ruling National Democratic Party and the potential fall of a regime that has been a pillar of U.S. standing in the Middle East for thirty-five years, is an unimagined challenge.

In that context, President Obama and his advisors generally deserve high marks. Although the administration has, at times, been off balance in its statements, it has now defined a policy and is incrementally seeing it through. This is an evolving situation, the course of which the United States is able to affect only on the margins. Still, the administration has adopted a policy that can only be described as bold -- and risky. At its core is a reliance on the Egyptian military to perform its national duty and remove Mubarak from power. More likely than not, Obama's "transition" statement was based on intelligence and the analytical conclusion that senior Egyptian military leaders were already on the precipice of taking steps against Mubarak.

Should Mubarak Stay or Go?

That question appears to have now been answered with thundering clarity: in the eyes of the administration, it seems that he should go. For U.S. policy -- and for Egyptians at large -- there is no future for Mubarak. There is a question of timing, however. Mubarak has asked for eight more months, and President Obama's Tuesday statement stopped just short of saying he needed to resign immediately, leaving some room for ambiguity. Yet to Middle Easterners, the imagery of Mubarak and Obama appearing on television just moments after each other -- one saying "September" and the other saying "now" -- projected a clear message. The result is that every day Mubarak stays in office is a rebuke to Obama. Indeed, Mubarak may decide to stay a bit longer just to make the point that Obama could not push him out.

What Is the Military's Role?

This is the key variable in the equation. The most important observation is that -- despite billions of dollars in U.S. assistance, thousands of military exchanges, and dozens of joint exercises -- there are large parts of the

Egyptian military about which the United States knows very little. Still, up until the news of violence, the military was viewed as the most respected institution in the country and not necessarily complicit in the regime's excesses. It is therefore the institution most likely to trigger change.

At the moment, the military is undergoing a tug-of-war for its soul. On the one hand, Mubarak has named a triumvirate of leaders from various services -- intelligence, army, air force -- to bring them and the armed forces closer to him and make them full partners in the effort to extend his rule. On the other hand, the military has (at least until the violence) refused to fire on citizens, a fact reflected in Obama's heady compliments on Tuesday. In effect, Mubarak and Obama are each appealing to the military, one asking them "to stay the course" and the other urging them "to do the right thing" by removing Mubarak and beginning the transition. Military leaders are in a bind, but they must decide which route to take soon, because every day of inaction implicates them with the regime. And for President Obama, every day that passes without change further erodes an already weakened U.S. image.

Should the United States Suspend Aid?

Some have argued for suspending all U.S. aid to Egypt immediately. Although their objective is understandable, their prescription is incorrect. Again, the most likely agent of peaceful change at the moment -- the institution most likely to trigger transition -- is the military. The United States should therefore remain in contact with this institution in order to influence it, to the extent possible. The idea that Washington gains influence by cutting off assistance simply does not translate into Arabic. The administration is correct to maintain its current posture, continuing economic and military assistance to Egypt until it has greater clarity on the ground. A time may come, if the military decides fully to side with Mubarak or shoot protesters, when Washington can decide whether to suspend aid, but for now it should maintain the limited leverage and influence it has.

What Does Transition Mean in Practice?

Transition surely means something different to new Egyptian vice president Omar Suleiman than it does to opposition figures such as Mohamed ElBaradei or the head of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). It is difficult to envision a nonregime figure -- that is, someone who is neither a member of the national security establishment nor a proregime public figure (e.g., Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa) -- emerging as a transitional leader. Most likely, such a leader will come from the triumvirate of military figures Mubarak has named. Once a decision is finally made, many oppositionists may in fact breathe a sigh of relief after so much attention has been focused on the question of whether Mubarak will step down. If the new leadership shows itself to be serious about implementing constitutional, legal, and administrative changes to permit free and fair elections, this may suffice.

The Bigger Picture

Trite as it may sound, the events in Egypt are a true earthquake for U.S. posture in the Middle East. Even before this week's events, the United States was on a losing streak: Lebanon went from Hariri to Hizballah, Syria broke out from years of U.S.-imposed isolation, Muqtada al-Sadr got back in the saddle in Iraq, and the "peace process" -- which Obama proclaimed a top priority -- has remained dismally stuck in neutral for two years. The administration's few victories, such as broad support for Iran sanctions, do not stack up.

For now, a sober assessment of the Egypt situation leads one to conclude that it is neither the disaster some fear nor the dawn of a new day that some hope. Both outcomes are possible. On the plus side, the protests have been largely anti-Mubarak but not anti-America or anti-peace. Of course, that could change. And on the negative side, the absence of opposition leadership could open avenues for more radical elements to fill the void.

Accordingly, concern about the Muslim Brotherhood's potential emergence is warranted. The MB is not, as

some suggest, simply an Egyptian version of the March of Dimes; it is a fundamentally political organization that seeks to reorder Egyptian (and broader Muslim) society in an Islamist fashion. Tactically, the group will exploit whatever opportunities it is offered; it has renounced its most ambitious goals and violent means only as a result of regime compulsion, not by free choice.

Although the United States should do nothing to advocate for the MB's inclusion in Egypt's future political set-up, neither should it operate under the assumption that the group's ascension to power is inevitable, given the country's broad range of political alternatives. In fact, such an assumption is very dangerous and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As for concerns about Egypt's regional posture, some changes are surely in order. America's pillar is gone -- for the time being, there is no Arab state willing and able to project power more or less in concert with the United States. Some will say that this has not been the case with Egypt for some time; yet, although Cairo's influence has indeed waned, no other Arab state could ever come close to Egypt even on its bad days. Cairo's pillar status can be rejuvenated if the transition leads to a new government that both has popular support and sees value in continued strategic partnership with the United States -- a difficult but not impossible configuration. But that will take a long time.

Israel-Egypt Relations

On the Arab-Israeli front, prognosticating about a post-Mubarak government's view is pure speculation. Certain assessments are worthwhile, however. First, Cairo is unlikely to abrogate the Israel-Egypt peace treaty; Egypt's national security is too bound up in it. It is likely that an Egypt looking to maximize its own interests will maintain relations with Israel.

Beyond the treaty itself, Mubarak presided over such a cold peace with Israel that there are only a few things that could change. In the near term, gas sales to Israel and continued operation of the Qualifying Industrial Zones are variables. If a new government in Cairo bases its stance purely on Egyptian interests, both would remain unchanged. Currently, however, one of the few items on which virtually of Egypt's fractious opposition parties agree is the cessation of gas sales to Israel.

The biggest area of change would most likely be Gaza. As a partner with Israel in maintaining tight control of the territory, Cairo has put much effort into protecting the border. Although the government is likely to continue playing some role in preventing the import and export of weapons, many Egyptians want to end the perception that their country is helping to impede normal economic life in Gaza. Accordingly, devising a new border policy that is not based on Egypt's active participation is a high priority.

In the meantime, Israel is unlikely to take risks on other fronts when its southern front has just become an uncertainty for the first time in thirty years. More likely, Israel will wait to assess the impact of these events on its national security once the dust has cleared in Cairo. While wisely eschewing commentary on Egypt's domestic situation, Israel certainly has reason to loudly declare its interest that any successor government in Egypt fulfill its international obligations, such as maintaining the peace treaty. Indeed, this requirement should be the international community's policy as well.

This summary was edited by Allison LeBlanc.

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