

How the U.S. Should Handle Egypt [Updated]

Photo: Chris Hondros/Getty Images

After spending the weekend trying to balance its military ties to longtime ally Hosni Mubarak, its relationship with Israel, and overwhelming public demonstrations for true democracy, the U.S. has yet to articulate a clear position either for or against the Egyptian autocrat. Here are a few suggestions for how the White House should proceed, ranked from best to worst.

Salon's Alex Pareene thinks it's best if we forgo our narcissism just this once and stay out of it. Rather than "[p]rop up a new Egyptian leader and somehow make this revolution spread to Iran," why don't we let it unfold without our interference? "It goes against the nature of the medium to suggest that we just watch and analyze the events of a far-away nation and examine America's role only in a historical sense. But our national narcissism is infecting every corner of the debate, from all sides." Besides, with the [revolutionary tsunami](#) cresting across the Middle East, no one can predict what backing the protesters will mean for Egypt or other regimes. Although the fear of revolt has spread to Syria, thus far unrest has plagued administrations who backed Washington over its own people. It doesn't seem like the Egyptian public is asking for our two cents. [\[Salon\]](#)

Malou Innocent, a foreign-policy analyst with the Cato Institute, says the U.S. needs to stand with the Egyptian people: "Oppressed people rarely get opportunities to express their anguish and disillusionment. ... It is well past time for U.S. policymakers to stand with the Egyptian people and rethink Mubarak's purported role as an 'anchor of stability' in the Middle East." Thus far, the White House's position, which has supported the idea of both an orderly transition and come out against violent suppression and closing off tools of expression seems like a good *first* step in the right direction. [\[HuffPo\]](#)

However, Obama risks making the same mistake as Jimmy Carter. Slate's Kai Bird argues that the White House is using the same script it used with the Shah of Iran in 1978 when Carter tried to balance loyalty to the American-backed Pahlavi dictatorship with supporting a democratic uprising. "Carter tried to have it both ways, modulating his support for the Shah, calling for political liberalization, and warning the Shah against the use of state violence against unarmed protesters." In that case, months later, Ayatollah Khomeini and his Shiite clerics "forged a theocratic dictatorship." Bird says the U.S. needs to position itself on the side of reformists to prevent an Islamist takeover and make clear that our interests aren't only "driven by our addiction to oil." But after 30 years of backing Mubarak, that might be a hard sell. [\[Slate\]](#)

The Council of Foreign Relations is of two minds. Elliott Abrams says our administration has offered "too little, too late" to Arab publics hungry for freedom,

whereas Robert Danin acknowledges the difficulty in endorsing democracy while supporting Mubarak. "The worse it gets out in the region, the worse it gets in Egypt, the more those two principles are going to come into conflict for the administration." With the "march of millions" scheduled for tomorrow, those two principles are on a collision course on the world stage. [\[CFR\]](#)

Did you forget about Israel? Any direct support of the revolutionaries is bound to anger our ally. The country has already expressed anger at the United States' betrayal, with newspapers calling Clinton and Obama's position "a bullet in the back from Uncle Sam." Naturally Israel is going to create a lot of bluster, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has chosen to stay mum, perhaps because he recognizes that stability is paramount. What's more, members of Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's leading opposition party, have said in the past that if it came to power, it would [recognize Israel's legitimacy](#) and respect existing treaties. So let's cross that bridge when we come to it.

[\[Reuters\]](#)

The Atlantic suggests another course of action entirely. Acknowledging that any revolution will have to be "organic and internal," Max Fisher suggests incentivizing Egypt's military, the largest in the Middle East, to back the protesters. The military has yet to offer its support to either Mubarak's regime or the call for revolt. But our annual \$1.2 billion in military aid could be a bargaining chip. Considering widespread reports from Tunis to Cairo that police used tear-gas canisters emblazoned with the label "Made in the U.S.A." on protesters, this doesn't seem like the right time to flex our military might. What's more, if it emerges that we tried to buy off the Army, it taints the legitimacy of a new regime. Is there some kind of weather force bigger than a tsunami? Because that's what we might be looking at. [\[Atlantic\]](#)

By: [Nitasha Tiku](#) FILED UNDER: [REVOLT LIKE AN EGYPTIAN](#)