



Mideast Violence Prompts Calls For New U.S. Policy

by Michele Kelemen - *September 20, 2012*

The protests and violence aimed at U.S. interests in the Middle East have set off a domestic debate about what the U.S. could or should do to relate to new political movements in the region. The Obama administration says it will continue to engage the region. The campaign of Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, says the U.S. needs to do more to lead.

But there are others who say that both parties have it wrong, and that U.S. policies from both Republican and Democratic administrations have failed.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says diplomacy can be a risky business — particularly in countries going through difficult transitions. She says the violence in the region now is mainly because extremists are exploiting the inflamed passions over a video that insults the Prophet Muhammad.

"But overwhelmingly, we have found that the people of Egypt, of Libya, of Yemen and Tunisia are not prepared to trade the tyranny of a dictator for the tyranny of a mob," she said earlier this week. "They want to turn their attention to the future to provide better opportunities for themselves and their children, and they want a strong partnership with the United States and the American people, based on mutual interests and mutual respect."

Radical Islamists Exploiting Frustrations

And the U.S. has to figure out a way to do that, says Michele Dunne, who runs the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council.

"This is too important for the U.S. to give up on, these transitions in the Arab world in general and certainly Egypt in particular. As difficult as it is, the United States really can't just walk away from this," Dunne says. "I do think the

administration has been more or less on the right track in terms of saying the most important thing we can do to support these transitions is to give economic help."

That's because, like Clinton, Dunne sees the latest violence in the region as an internal struggle, with radical Islamists tapping into the frustrations of many.

"There's obviously a well of resentment there that people can draw on it, but I think it's important to see that there are specific people drawing on that well for specific reasons," she says. "There's kind of a competition among different kinds of political movements to be the ones that really stand up for Islam and stands up to the West for Islam."

Many analysts say the U.S. is not in the driver's seat. But Michael Singh, a former Bush administration official who is now with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says the Obama administration lacks a clear strategy.

"They've been hands off. And obviously they've been dealt a very difficult hand here. The situation is very much in flux, very difficult, and trying to develop a strategy amidst all this change is hard," Singh says. "But at the same time ... we can't just be reactive."

Need For Clearer, More Assertive Policy?

Singh says the U.S. needs to be clear about what it wants to see in the region and be more assertive on Iran, in Syria and promoting better outcomes in political transitions elsewhere.

"I think they need to take a step back and come up with a more proactive strategy for dealing with what's happening in the Middle East," Singh says, "because this turbulence is going to be going on for quite some time."

But Republicans and Democrats alike are suggesting policies that have failed, says Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute. He says the U.S. invasion of Iraq and aid programs that have propped up authoritarian governments in the past have allowed extremists to gain influence by blaming the West for their problems.

"If this engagement has bought us something, what exactly is it? If all of our work, if all of our diplomacy, if all of our military activities over the years can be undone by this silly video?" he asks. "If that can happen in the span of a few days, what have we really purchased, with all this work, with all this risk and even lives lost?"

Preble says he is not advocating walking away. He says the U.S. needs to keep diplomatic channels open and promote trade with the region. He just doesn't like the Democratic or Republican approach to continue funneling U.S. taxpayer money into the region or intervene militarily for what he calls amorphous goals.