

Washington's Egyptian Conundrum

The Skeptics

Christopher A. Preble | January 31, 2011

The Obama administration appears to have been caught a bit flat-footed with the events in Egypt over the past week. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's prediction last Tuesday that Hosni Mubarak's regime was stable, and Vice President Biden's claim that Mubarak is not a dictator, are unlikely to be celebrated in the annals of American diplomacy alongside Ronald Reagan's "tear down this wall."

But predicting the future is always a dangerous business. On the question of what the U.S. government should do right now, a consensus is building in support of the Obama administration's decision to suspend aid, and calls to resume that aid only when a new government is in place in Egypt, one that is committed to principles of liberal democracy. That last part might prove the most difficult, in a country that has no democratic tradition. Some worry that the leading opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, will emerge as the dominant power in the country (despite it playing a small role in the protests, and despite its profession of support for the secular leader of the opposition Mohamed ElBaradei).

The Obama administration is stuck with a policy not entirely of its own making – decades of U.S. taxpayer support for the Mubarak regime – but it also seems trapped by the dominant worldview in Washington that is preoccupied with finding a solution to every problem in the world. This global view flows from deeply flawed assumptions about the likelihood of a worst-case scenario transpiring in every case, and then exaggerating the impact of that worst-case on U.S. security. In many instances, the impact is presumed to be nearly catastrophic. In actuality, they almost never are.

Might Egypt be an exception? It is an important country in its own right, traditionally a center of the Arab world. Its population of 80 million people is larger than that of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon combined. Egypt is the second leading recipient of U.S. foreign aid, behind only Israel, and it straddles one of the most important choke points in the world, the Suez Canal. Given its size, influence and location, there is the possibility that this spreads elsewhere. Protests have also broken out in Yemen, Algeria, and Sudan. The Saudis and Jordanians are nervous.

So how should the U.S. respond? In the short-term, the U.S. government needs to strike a balance, and not be seen as pushing too hard for Mubarak's ouster; but Washington should not anoint a would-be successor, either. The message should be: this is for the Egyptian people to decide.

Because Washington has been such a long-time supporter of Mubarak's regime, it is likely that many in the pro-democracy movement harbor anti-American sentiments. This was certainly the case in Iran following the overthrow of the Shah. But again, that is a worse-case scenario. If Mubarak is removed from power, it could pose problems for core

U.S. objectives in the region. But we shouldn't assume that what comes after will be much worse.

As a general rule, U.S. policy should not support undemocratic regimes on the erroneous assumption that we need them more than they need us. Washington should stop behaving as though the nation's survival depends upon a particular regime holding power in Egypt or Yemen or Pakistan, or anywhere else, for that matter. If our negotiations with various governments started from that very different presumption, I think we would be in a lot better shape today.

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