The Missing Obama-Romney Debate on Egypt

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Neither candidate recommended a way to address the country's increasing radicalism and instability. How well do they really understand the problem?

Hosni Mubarak had to go.

It's nice that the presidential candidates can agree on something. (Never mind that they agree on something that happened over twenty months ago.) During last night's debate, both candidates said that the United States had to stand with the brave Egyptians who took to Tahrir Square to demand Mubarak's ouster. This was, in fact, the position of the American public, which supported Egypt's uprising by a whopping 82-11 margin. Who would want to run against those numbers?

Yet neither candidate articulated a clear policy towards post-Mubarak Egypt. (Perhaps this is a reflection of Americans' own ambivalence towards Egypt, which has a middling 47-percent approval rating among the American public.) Instead, the candidates espoused a virtually identical set of guiding principles -- Egypt's new government, they agreed, should uphold the rights of women, protect religious minorities, and act as a partner in American counterterrorism efforts -- but failed to say how they would deal with Egyptian Islamists' rejection of these things. In this vein, the latest draft of Egypt's constitution conditions women's equality on its adherence to "Islamic sharia judgments," and Islamists have said that this could legalize marriage to young girls -- perhaps as early as nine years old. Would either Obama or Romney use American aid to Egypt as leverage to protect Egyptian girls from this horrific future?

Presumably not, judging by last night's debate. For Romney, economic aid is a tool for preventing the influx of radicals, because without economic development, "you see al Qaeda rushing in, you see other jihadist groups rushing in." For Obama, economic aid is meant to help the Egyptian people realize their aspirations, which "are similar to young people's here": jobs, housing, and education. In other words, both candidates view economic aid as an important ingredient in producing a politically moderate, economically viable Egyptian future. Pay the aid now, the argument goes, and reap the rewards later -- perhaps much later.

The problem with this approach, however, is that it ignores what Egypt's Islamist leaders are doing now. In addition to its restrictive clause on women's rights, the new constitution draft would deny religious freedom to Shiites and Baha'is. ("Baha'is are a very eccentric group that is far from Islam," a Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary leader told me earlier this month, as he justified denying Baha'is constitutional protections.) Meanwhile, Egypt's judicial system continues to prosecute blasphemy, and a television host critical of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was recently sentenced to four months in prison. Indeed, Morsi is establishing himself as Egypt's next autocrat: he seized legislative and constitution authority through an August fiat, and he is reportedly considering a new emergency law that would rival Mubarak's.

The trends in Egypt's foreign policy outlook are similarly disturbing. Egypt's military has been slow to respond to terrorism in the unstable Sinai Peninsula, where al-Qaeda may be establishing a foothold, and an attack in August killed sixteen Egyptian soldiers while attempting to breach the Egyptian-Israeli border. Meanwhile, following the September 11 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, President Morsi waited two full days before speaking out, and he was recently caught on camera saying "amen" as an imam prayed for the destruction of Jews. Two weeks ago, the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood -- which is effectively Egypt's new ruling party -- called for jihad to capture Jerusalem. And Salafist parties, which represent the strongest political challenge to the Muslim Brotherhood, have encouraged Egyptian youths to fight the "jihad" in Syria.

In other words, Egypt is already sliding towards the kind of radicalism that Governor Romney rightly wants to prevent, and this will inhibit the economic prosperity that President Obama rightly wants for Egypt. This is why the next president should work to break these trends as soon as possible -- before they harden.

American economic aid -- currently valued at $250 million -- is one tool that can be used towards this end, and our substantial influence in international economic organizations such as the IMF -- from which Egypt is seeking a $4.8 billion loan -- is another. Specifically, the next administration can condition direct and indirect economic aid to Egypt on promoting tolerance at home and peaceful relations abroad. Simply sending Egypt money with the aim of encouraging economic development -- and, in turn, political moderation -- won't make it magically happen. If anything, sending that aid will affirm for Egypt's Islamists that they face no consequences for their radicalism, and prevent them from making tough choices that could force them towards moderation.

Using aid as leverage is not only good policy; it is good politics. According to a January 2011 Gallup poll, 59 percent of Americans favor cutting foreign aid, including majorities of both Republicans and Democrats. Americans aren't eager to send money abroad -- and they will be especially unenthusiastic about sending taxpayer dollars to countries that are theocratizing, rather than democratizing.

Of course, both candidates support conditioning aid to Egypt on its commitment to the peace treaty with Israel, which Obama called a "red line" during last night's debate. (This, by the way, is both good policy and good politics: America has an interest in regional peace, and Israel enjoys a 71-percent approval rating.) But since both Obama and Romney view American interests in Egypt as more expansive than simply maintaining the treaty, both candidates could have benefited from explaining how they would have pursued those interests.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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