

George W. Bush, Disliked but Appreciated

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Articles & Testimony

Protesters in the Middle East have made clear that they look to the U.S. for inspiration and support, and that they look down on the U.S. when they believe this support is not materializing.

The foreign policy of the United States is not a top concern for most Americans, who are struggling to make ends meet and are afflicted with growing election fever. However, in the Arab world Washington's foreign policy has many feeling disappointed and abandoned as they continue to struggle more than a year into the Arab uprisings. Despite the initial enthusiasm for President Barack Obama, the administration's reactive, incoherent policies toward the Arab uprisings have some Arabs reminiscing about the Bush years.

During a recent trip to Egypt, I heard the deputy head of a Cairo-based nongovernmental organization that champions racial, religious, gender and political tolerance mention that he and his friends made John McCain T-shirts before the 2008 U.S. presidential election. He explained that he evaluated U.S. presidents based on their efforts to spread democracy, and believed that President George W. Bush had put more pressure on the Egyptian government than Democratic presidents, because the Democrats were more concerned with maintaining good relations with Cairo. My source added that most Egyptians indisputably disliked Bush, but there was no love lost for Obama either. Furthermore, he believed a survey of Egyptian democracy activists would find that most preferred Bush to Obama.

Indeed, Egyptian human rights democracy advocate Hisham Kassem has been quoted saying that the Bush administration was the first to seriously address democratization in Egypt. According to Kassem, "The year 2005 was the best year my generation has seen. I am openly saying that without the [U.S.] pressure, there was no way that this progress would have happened." And it is not just Egyptian liberals who hold this view. Muslim Brotherhood members have spoken about the benefits of the Bush administration's democracy promotion, as well.

This sentiment exists elsewhere in the region. For example, in mid-December protesters in Kafr Nabel in Syria's Idlib province displayed a sign that read, "Obama's procrastination kills us: We miss Bush's audacity. The world is better with America's Republicans."

Polls show that the Arab world's views of the Obama administration's policies are quite negative. According to Zogby's "Arab Attitudes, 2011" poll, which was conducted following Obama's May 2011 Middle East speech, favorable attitudes toward the U.S. in six Middle Eastern countries shot up between 2008 and 2009, the last year of the Bush administration and the first year of the Obama administration, respectively. This was indicative of the great enthusiasm for Obama in the Arab world at the start of his term, and especially following his historic speech in Cairo in June 2009.

At the same time, by 2011, Zogby's poll also showed, Obama's ratings in the Arab world were at 10 percent or less, with most Arabs saying that the U.S. president had not met the high expectations that he had set during his Cairo speech. Furthermore, his performance ratings on the issues of Palestine and engagement with the Muslim world -- issues in which the administration has been seriously invested -- were the lowest of five foreign policy issues listed.

It was no surprise that the Arab world was disappointed by the peace process, which ground to a halt almost before it began. What was more interesting, however, was the deeply pessimistic view of the current administration's attempts to build bridges to the Muslim world. Given the surge in U.S. popularity among Arabs following Obama's inauguration, this fact proved even more striking.

It follows that the Obama administration's response to the Arab uprisings is to blame for much of this disappointment. The administration has made little distinction in its policies between countries vital to U.S. national security interests, which present great challenges for policy formation, and those of marginal importance.

For instance, on Jan. 25, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the Hosni Mubarak regime stable. Yet only a week later Obama was calling for Mubarak to begin a transition immediately. On Syria, Clinton continued to refer to Bashar Assad as a reformer and the administration called on him to make meaningful reforms long after it became clear that this hope was naive. The administration's policy managed to anger those on both sides of the divide. Saudi Arabia was furious with the U.S. for abandoning Mubarak, while liberal activists condemned the administration for moving too slowly.

A year after the start of the revolution in Egypt, the dust from the Arab uprisings has not yet settled and the future of democracy in the Middle East is less than certain. Developing a sound policy toward the Arab uprisings when American influence in the region is rapidly declining, due to internal pressures facing many of Washington's allies and the rise of anti-Western Islamist forces, is a difficult task. Pressing domestic American challenges make this even more difficult.

However, given what is at stake, the Obama administration's lagging, reactive policies are especially disappointing. It is not too late for the administration to emphasize its commitment to championing democracy, human rights, and other U.S. national interests in the Arab world. Protesters in the Middle East have made clear that they look to the U.S. for inspiration and support, and that they look down on the U.S. when they believe this support is not materializing.

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