Needed: High-Level U.S. Attention to the Dire Situation in Egypt

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Brief Analysis

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Ambassador William B. Taylor -- the highly regarded diplomatic "firefighter" just named as the State Department's special coordinator for Middle East transitions -- has his work cut out for him. The toughest case is Egypt.

Last weekend's mob attacks on the Israeli and Saudi embassies, with Egyptian security forces killing three protestors and injuring hundreds in their effort to regain control, are the most recent example of a hopeful democratic moment going sour. Although the Egyptian military was so flummoxed by the events that it announced its intention to use the much-despised emergency regulations against hooliganism and lawlessness, it is no less likely that the same mass protests that felled President Hosni Mubarak eight months ago will eventually turn against the country's current military rulers. And if that happens, the military may not be as welcoming of political change as it was in February. Indeed, there is nothing like the image of a former president on a hospital gurney in a metal cage in a Cairo courthouse to make the members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces reconsider their eagerness to return to the barracks and hand over the reins of power to newly elected leaders. The potential for Egypt's revolution to take an anti-democratic turn -- either toward more radical, anti-liberal, anti-West policies or toward a new authoritarianism -- is frighteningly high.

No matter which path the Egyptian revolution takes, Egypt-Israel peace, in any tangible sense of the term, is almost surely a victim. While the Egyptian authorities recognize that a formal break with Israel runs against their interests, peace has already been denuded of virtually all its content. Even before Mubarak fell, peace had only four real elements left: the gas pipeline to Israel, the operation of several qualifying industrial zones, severely limited diplomatic relations, and well-defined counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation vis-a-vis Islamist extremists. And, already, much of that is gone or transformed beyond recognition. *Al-Ahram* reported yesterday, for example,

that prior to the attack on the Israeli embassy, Egypt asked Israel to keep its ambassador to Cairo on an extended holiday in Tel Aviv, fearful that his presence would be a lightning rod for protests. (The Israelis sent him back to Cairo nonetheless.) On the current glidepath, Egypt-Israel relations are headed toward a situation of "no war, no peace." Some Egyptians may believe this is politically optimal, but in practice it is a high-wire act almost impossible to sustain.

For the United States, the collapsing Egyptian situation in general -- and the sorry state of Egypt-Israel peace in particular -- is a slow-motion disaster. The fate of Egypt is far more consequential to U.S. interests than the overthrow of Qadhafi, the diplomatic clash with Palestinians at the United Nations, or much else on the regional agenda. Everything America has accomplished in the Middle East during the last thirty years has been built on the foundation of the Camp David Accords and the transformation of Egypt from Soviet client to American ally. If that foundation collapses, much of America's standing in the region collapses as well.

Neither Ambassador Taylor nor his well-respected counterpart in Cairo, U.S. ambassador Anne Patterson, has been dealt a hand that is strong enough to affect the pace and content of change in Egypt. The United States has virtually no economic leverage over the Egyptian government; disagreements between Cairo and Washington, and between the administration and Congress, have essentially suspended the U.S. aid program. Furthermore, military aid is a hollow lever, given that the Pentagon wants to sustain the U.S. relationship with the Egyptian armed forces at least as much -- if not more -- than the Egyptians themselves. In this environment, U.S. threats have limited utility.

Even so, this does not mean Washington should not try to affect the political dynamic in Cairo. Two ideas are worth considering.

With little money in the U.S. coffers to offer Cairo, the administration could put on the table something many Egyptians may find even more appealing: free trade. It is the most potent arrow in the U.S. quiver, a sign of unmistakable partnership toward the long-term growth of the relationship. Everyone recognizes that it won't be easy to negotiate a free-trade agreement or secure Congressional approval, but it would send Egypt a powerful message of U.S. commitment in the weeks before the parliamentary election to set the achievement of an FTA as a goal of U.S. policy.

Such an announcement would set the stage for a second initiative: a clarifying moment for U.S.-Egyptian relations. Here, the model would be Vice President Biden's visit to Beirut in May 2009, when he politely but clearly explained to Lebanese voters the consequences of casting their ballots for Hizballah. In the end, it is impossible to know precisely how influential Biden's message was, but in an election that moderate forces won by a hair's breadth, every vote counted. (The fact that Hizballah eventually maneuvered itself into a dominant political position in Lebanon is a different story.)

As Egypt's elections approach, the likely results range between bad and worse. Liberal, reformist forces will not have a majority; the question is how large a plurality will be achieved by illiberal Islamist groups. In this environment, the administration has little to lose (and perhaps much to gain) from engaging Egyptians in a respectful but clear discussion about the consequences -- in terms of their relationship with the United States, Western nations, and international financial institutions -- should they opt for leaders whose raison d'etre is fundamentally anti-U.S. and anti-West.

This isn't something Taylor, Patterson, or even Secretary of State Clinton can do. Given that the president originally went to Cairo to initiate a dialogue with Muslims around the world, a message this important needs to be delivered by Barack Obama himself.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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