

Ideas for U.S. Middle East Policy in the Wake of the Egypt Crisis

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Brief Analysis

On February 9, 2011, Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee at a hearing titled "Recent Developments in Egypt and Lebanon: Implications for U.S. Policy and Allies in the Broader Middle East." The following is an excerpt from his prepared remarks. [Read the complete testimony \(/templateC14.php?CID=561\)](/templateC14.php?CID=561).

The winds of change that first began to blow in Tunis and turned into a tornado in Cairo will have an impact elsewhere in the region. It is a mistake, however, to view the Middle East as a series of dominoes waiting to fall. The domestic context in each country is the dominant factor determining the stability or instability of a particular regime, and each country's situation is quite different from the next.

Apart from the intensive focus on promoting the development of a democratic Egypt that continues to view itself as a partner with the United States, the following themes should guide U.S. policy in the uncertain period ahead.

Strengthen partnerships:

The apparent crumbling of America's Egyptian pillar, at least for the foreseeable future, underscores the importance of strengthening our other partnerships.

- The U.S.-Israel relationship is at the top of the list, because of both the shock to Israel's national security structure that just occurred and the critical role that U.S.-Israel relations play in the advance of U.S. security interests throughout the region. Leaders of our both countries should commence immediate consultations on ways to strengthen the strategic partnership between these two democratic allies, in substance and in perception.
- U.S.-Gulf partnerships are also critical. The United States should find various ways to project its continuing commitment to the security and stability of the Gulf and to the Arab states of the region, including Iraq. This includes - - but is not limited to -- projection of military power, high-level visits, and bilateral and regional discussions on security issues.
- Washington should also find ways, perhaps in concert with Arab oil producers, to strengthen the Jordanian government, which -- through King Abdullah's appointment of a new government -- has renewed its commitment to

the Jordanian people to advance the pace of political reform and ease the economic dislocations from which Jordan is currently suffering.

Promote sustained and substantive reform:

However courageous the people of Egypt have shown themselves to be in the face of a government that rejected repeated pleas for political reform, incremental and orderly change remains the preferred path to political change. In that regard, the Egyptian and Tunisian cases now provide Washington with a new opportunity to engage Arab leaders and Arab peoples on ways to build more democratic, representative, responsive, and legitimate political systems, free of corruption and with respect for individual political rights. High-level officials should urgently take these two messages -- a desire to strengthen partnerships and a willingness to work cooperatively on reform -- to regional capitals.

Especially vulnerable in this regard are several of the region's republics, which unlike the monarchies, have actually promised democracy and failed to deliver. (The monarchies have set the bar lower in terms of political commitments and, though they fall short, can generally rely on other forms of legitimacy and authenticity than can the republics.) On the reform agenda, Washington should give high priority to both Tunisia, where it is in U.S. interests to see a model of secular democratic reform succeed, and the Palestinian Authority (PA)-ruled West Bank, where the current circumstances may make possible a local election that could be an important legitimizing tool for the current PA leadership.

Direct reform message toward repressive regimes:

The contrast between the Obama administration's approach to the pro-democracy movements in June 2009 Iran and January 2011 Egypt is striking. As we move forward, U.S. policy should be at least as supportive of proponents of peaceful democratic change in states whose governments have adopted policies inimical to our interests as we have been in states whose governments have aligned themselves with our interests. In practice, this means the use of U.S. strategic communications, public diplomacy, and other tangible assets to assist and support the idea of democratic change in Iran and Syria and the courageous people willing to fight for that goal.

Don't let Iran benefit from our distraction:

The simple fact that senior U.S. officials, from the president on down, were fixated on Egypt over the past two weeks meant that they were not focused on the urgent need to compel Iran to change policy on its nuclear program. When this reality is combined with statements by various U.S. and allied officials that the timeline for Iranian nuclear progress has been pushed back, Iranians might conclude that the United States is either distracted or complacent in its campaign to force a change in Iranian nuclear policy. That would be a dangerous situation. Vigilance is in order. We should not rule out the idea that Iran may misread the situation and opt to seek a speedier breakout, expand its capabilities in new and dangerous ways, or attempt to exert its influence elsewhere in the region by pursuing some new form of provocative behavior. Some in Tehran may even believe the moment is ripe for deploying fifth-columnists and political saboteurs with the goal of toppling regimes they consider weak and unstable.

Focus on government commitments and long-term objectives in Lebanon:

The appointment of a Hizballah-nominated prime minister in Lebanon is a serious blow to U.S. interests. The radical Shiite organization Hizballah -- backed by Iran and Syria -- has turned the tables on the coalition of moderate, pro-West forces, employing intimidation and fear as its principal weapons. On Israel's northern border, as now on Israel's southern border, uncertainty reigns. For the United States, near-term decisions need to be made about U.S. relations with the new government in Lebanon. The wisest route would be to allow the action or inaction of the Lebanese government to guide these decisions.

Lebanon has responsibilities to bear under UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which governs the 2006 war ceasefire, as well as Resolution 1757, which governs the mandate and operations of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Failure to fulfill obligations under these and other relevant resolutions should trigger consideration by the Obama administration of punitive measures, including coordination with members of the Security Council on steps against the government of Lebanon and a review of our military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. Through it all, Washington should keep its eye on the long-term goal of sustaining and developing indigenous forces that reject the foreign domination and external influence of Syria and Iran, that oppose Hizballah's reckless policy of holding the Lebanese population hostage to its phantom "resistance" against Israel, and that want instead to build a free, democratic, and independent Lebanon.

Adopt a more sober and realistic approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace:

Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere show that

- the absence of progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace appears to have not been a factor in the popular unrest, and
- Israeli fears about the stability and security of the parties to whom it makes irrevocable concessions are neither inflated nor based on unfathomable worst-case scenarios.

In this context, the Obama administration should explore whether these two factors have changed the political calculus on the part of the PA leadership to the extent that they are now willing to engage in substantive negotiations. Ideas that may have been unacceptable to Palestinians in the past -- ranging from Israeli demands for long-term security presence in the Jordan Valley to incrementalist or partial arrangements short of a full peace agreement -- may today be ready for negotiation.

Even without a change in approach by the PA leadership, the Obama administration should focus more attention on the need for substantive investment in the institution building now underway in the West Bank. This bottom-up process is the disadvantaged stepchild of the more high-profile effort to promote top-down diplomatic success. The appointment of a senior official with specific responsibility for the institution-building process would be a step in the right direction.

At the same time, U.S. officials should recognize that Israeli leaders are quite understandably shaken by the events in Cairo and are likely to await clarity on the Egyptian political scene to assess the impact of changes there on items that affect Israeli security, such as relations with Hamas, security in Sinai, Gaza border security, transit of natural gas to Israel, and cooperation on counterterrorism. Working with Israel to address these new concerns should be a top priority.

In this environment, it would be a mistake for the administration to believe that now is a propitious moment for grand peace plans or for made-in-America bridging proposals. Given the seismic change on Israel's southern frontier, such a U.S. approach would only confirm the worst fears of Israeli leaders and Israeli public opinion about U.S. understanding of Israel's security predicament. However, the United States would be wise to explore the possibility of progress on the Arab-Israeli front, based on the idea that the changed regional landscape may make once "unacceptable" ideas more palatable to the Palestinians, or that building the foundation of peace in a bottom-up process may eventually make the top-down diplomacy more amenable to breakthrough.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖



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