

Is Caution the Right U.S. Strategy?

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The New York Times convened an online panel of six Middle East experts to discuss the Obama administration's cautious approach to Egypt: aiming for stability and holding off on a rapid ouster of Mr. Mubarak. David Makovsky contributes.

The New York Times convened an online panel of six Middle East experts to discuss the Obama administration's cautious approach to Egypt: aiming for stability and holding off on a rapid ouster of Hosni Mubarak. The following is a contribution by Washington Institute Ziegler distinguished fellow David Makovsky, director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. Read the entire discussion on [NYTimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/02/07/is-caution-the-right-us-strategy-on-egypt) (<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/02/07/is-caution-the-right-us-strategy-on-egypt>).

Cautionary Lessons from Iran and Lebanon

President Obama is walking a tightrope: On the one hand, he aims to support American democratic values in non-democratic states. On the other hand, he and his advisers must realize that democratic revolutions in the Middle East have all too often been subverted by groups that use liberal means to reach illiberal ends.

Contemporary history teaches us to be cautious when examining the intersection of Islamic parties and revolutions.

In 1979, people of all political inclinations took to the streets in massive demonstrations to oust the Shah from Tehran. Liberals, trade unionists, and Communists joined hands with Islamists. Yet, it was not long before the Islamist-dominated Iranian parliament impeached the new moderate Iranian president Bani Sadr and the Revolutionary Guards seized his office. In the years that followed, Islamists proceeded to discard civil liberties, including imprisoning the masses who protested the sham elections of June 2009.

In 2005, the world celebrated the "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon. It is widely believed that Hezbollah was behind the political assassination of beloved former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, which triggered the uprising.

In May 2008, its militia coerced the Druze -- a key pillar of the Cedar Revolution -- to rescind their support for Saad Hariri. Finally, Hezbollah toppled the Lebanese government last month in opposition to the international tribunal investigating Rafik Hariri's assassination.

Likewise, when people say that the U.S. need not worry about the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood because they are supported by less than 30 percent of the public, they miss the point. The Islamists have demonstrated that they are potent not because they are a majority, but because they are a determined and disciplined minority.

They do not play by democratic rules. Both in the case of Hezbollah and Hamas, they created their own Iran-backed independent militias that exploit the fragility of the state. The Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas accused Hamas, which was in a power sharing government with Abbas, of a coup when it expelled the authority's security forces from Gaza in June 2007.

We cannot be certain whether the Muslim Brotherhood will follow these models. (Saying you are against violence as the Brotherhood says when they have the Egyptian security state on top of them does not count for much.) Given the complexity of the issue, the U.S. would do well to couple its support for democratic values with quiet support for Egyptian military efforts to reach out to assorted democratic forces in the opposition. Let those Egyptian forces negotiate a plan for constitutional change that nobody can charge is "made in the U.S.A." ❖

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