

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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<http://www.sazionfed.co.za>

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Can Obama maintain his Egypt tightrope act?

By Howard LaFranchi, JWR, 9 February 2011

http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0211/obama_tightrope.php3

The Obama administration is trying to maintain the balancing act it has pursued in Egypt, between political transition and stability, but a shaking tightrope - events on the ground - is raising questions about whether the current approach is tenable.

A growing number of voices in the foreign policy community find the administration's approach increasingly confusing and incoherent. President Obama has bounced from demanding a transition "now" to appearing to endorse a stability-first, slow-track process, these critics say.

The "confusion" these critics lament, some regional experts say, actually results from the administration's reluctance to go where it originally appeared to be headed: firmly on the side of the Egyptian people and their demands for change.

"They [in the administration] keep stepping back from the brink of taking a principled position. In fact, they have gone there but then stepped back," says Daniel Levy, co-director of the Middle East task force at the New American Foundation in Washington.

The balancing of priorities and interests - and the stepping back and forth that leads to - makes it seem as though the US is mostly reacting to events, Mr. Levy says. "The only way to get ahead of the curve is to take a principled position and stick with it," he adds, "but it's extremely difficult to do that."

The administration's most recent public pronouncements seem designed to underscore a sense that the US is keeping up pressure on the Mubarak regime to move swiftly towards genuine reform.

Vice President Joe Biden spoke Tuesday by telephone with Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman, and shortly thereafter the White House issued a statement listing the specific demands Mr. Biden had communicated.

Biden told Mr. Suleiman that the US expects the government to "restrain" the Ministry of Interior - the much-feared police - by "ending the arrests, harassment, beating, and detention" of protesters and journalists, and to "immediately" rescind the longstanding emergency law. The US also wants a "broadening" of participation in the national dialogue, and inclusion of the opposition in developing "a road map and timetable for transition."

Biden reiterated US support for "an orderly transition in Egypt that is prompt, meaningful, peaceful, and legitimate," the statement said. The closest the White House came to repeating Obama's call of last week for Mubarak to "do the right thing" - presumably that he commit to leaving office sooner than his current plan of holding the reins until September - was Biden urging "immediate, irreversible progress that responds to the aspirations of the Egyptian people."

How long the administration will have that statement stand as its position towards events in Egypt is unclear. On Wednesday, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton planned to spend several hours at the White House, meeting with President Obama and other senior administration foreign policy and security officials.

The meetings were sure to take up the administration's dissatisfaction with some of Mr. Suleiman's recent comments — such as the view that Egypt is not yet ready for democracy - and the pace and breadth of initial transition measures, some officials and policy experts said.

But even as criticism of the administration's handling of the crisis has grown, some foreign policy experts — and in particular some former diplomats with long careers of managing international crises - have stepped up support for the administration's balancing of interests and principles.

"This president, who is trying mightily to accommodate the pull of idealism and real world interests, has no option but to continue to try to achieve both," writes Nicholas Burns, a former undersecretary of State for political affairs in the George W. Bush administration, in a commentary on the Foreign Policy website.

On the one hand, it will be "vital" for Obama to continue to speak out "in support of a future of freedom in the Middle East," says Ambassador Burns, now at Harvard University's Kennedy School after 27 years in the foreign service. But Obama will also have to keep in mind some of the US's "most important global objectives," he adds, including Egyptian-Israeli peace and Egypt's role in "countering" Al Qaeda, Iran, and allied groups like Hezbollah.

That last point conjures up for New America's Levy the argument he says the Egyptian government, Israel, and other Arab governments have been impressing upon the Obama administration. "They've been really pressing hard with this idea that if Mubarak goes the way of [Tunisia's] Ben Ali, it's a possible floodgate" of chaos and extremism, Levy says. And as these countries seek to influence US actions, he adds, they know that "frightening images of radical Islam ... play particularly well in the US."

What Israel fears in Egypt

Sallai Meridor, Washington Post, 9 February 2011

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/09/AR2011020904537.html>

One might expect that Israelis, who live in the only democracy in the Middle East, would turn out in the squares of Jerusalem and the gardens of Tel Aviv to show solidarity with the demonstrators in Egypt. The protesters, after all, are seeking to overthrow an authoritarian regime.

Israelis, however, have stayed at home, warily following events on TV and the Internet.

It is not a democratic Egypt that Israelis fear but the prospect of Egypt being hijacked by enemies of democracy, of Israel and of the United States. Within every revolution are some who hope to use democratic processes to establish oppressive regimes. This was, to a large extent, what triumphed in Iran in 1979 and what happened in Gaza only five years ago. Many Israelis wonder why it would be any different in Egypt, which is home to the world's most powerful and popular Islamist movement.

Should the government of Hosni Mubarak be replaced by one not truly committed to freedom and peace, the consequences for Israel could be devastating. As Egypt struggles toward an internal balance that appeases all forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, peace with Israel could be the price of an Egyptian compromise. And the risks are worse if the Brotherhood, an organization deeply hostile to Israel, America and the West, gets to call the shots.

Consider what an Egyptian official once told me: "There is no war without Egypt." From 1948 to 1973, Israel had to fight four wars against coalitions of Arab armies. Since the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, however, there has not been even one war between Israel and Arab states. The lives of many Israelis and Arabs have been saved over the past four decades, and the security burden on Israel's economy has become more bearable. Yet if the peace with Egypt dissolves, the risks to the Jewish state and its citizens cannot be overstated.

The implications for the region could be massive. If Israel's western neighbor turns hostile, where would that leave our eastern neighbor, Jordan? Would it remain at peace with us? What would be the impact on other pro-American regimes? How many weeks, or days, would the new alignment of interests between Israel and most Arab regimes last against an aggressive and nuclear-armed Iran? If there is a negative outcome to the events unfolding in Egypt, the world will be living with a new Middle East, but it will be very different from the one we all aspire to.

Meanwhile, Israelis are uncertain about some positions of the U.S. administration. They remember how, after the 2009 presidential election, the Obama administration refused to support courageous Iranians who demonstrated against the oppressive "hate to America" regime in Tehran. People are understandably puzzled when news reports show an ally of America - even an authoritarian one - abandoned while U.S. rivals are honored with state dinners in Washington, despite their gross violations of human rights. In this highly charged region, Washington's actions are carefully watched. Israelis are looking at the results of U.S. policy in Iraq, the recent loss of Lebanon to Iran and how American pressure on Israel led to a "democratic" takeover of the Palestinian Authority by Hamas terrorists. Israelis live every day with the results of the U.S. administration's blunder that made already-difficult negotiations with the Palestinians impossible.

Israelis have learned the hard way that Israel cannot shape internal developments in our neighboring Arab states. While they wish America could responsibly engage in this process and ensure a positive outcome, they also doubt whether even America can prevent events from proceeding toward, and down, a slippery slope.

It is said, and is possibly true, that worry may be in the Jewish genes. With our history, having paved so many roads with good intentions only to see them lead to destruction, and having experienced how democratic slogans and processes have been abused again and again by murderous dictators, it is hard not to be concerned.

The future of Egypt is uncertain: Is it a hostile Islamist tyranny, using democracy as a fake ladder, or a compromise at Israel's expense that may be about to occur? The fear of war and death is on Israelis' hearts and minds.

But if a real democracy, committed to the values of freedom and peace, were to emerge in Egypt, Israelis would overwhelmingly support it.

No room at the table for Muslim Brotherhood

Jeff Jacoby, Boston Globe, 9 February 2011

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2011/02/09/no_room_at_table_for_muslim_brotherhood/

Free and democratic societies take chances. They guarantee freedom of speech and of the press, despite the risk that harmful, foolish, or depraved ideas may be promoted. They require due process of law before an offender can be punished, even though some who are guilty may go free as a result. They give citizens the power to elect their rulers, notwithstanding the possibility that voters will choose officials who are corrupt or incompetent.

But there are limits. "Liberty and justice for all" does not require empowering even those who seek to do away with liberty and justice. In a famous dissent to the 1949 Supreme Court case of *Terminiello v. Chicago*, Justice Robert Jackson warned against interpreting the First Amendment so categorically as to fortify "right and left totalitarian groups, who want nothing so much as to paralyze and discredit . . . democratic authority." A commitment to liberal democracy is not an obligation to open the democratic process to parties that reject liberal democracy itself. Jackson cautioned the court to "temper its doctrinaire logic with a little practical wisdom," lest it "convert the constitutional Bill of Rights into a suicide pact."

If even in America, where democratic institutions are firmly established, it is important to guard against antidemocratic cancers that latch on to political freedoms in order to destroy them, how much more important is it in Egypt, where a democratic republic is still struggling to be born?

This is why the question of the Muslim Brotherhood - officially banned in Egypt, but nevertheless the country's largest opposition group - and its role in Egypt's future is so crucial.

The Brotherhood is the world's most influential Islamist organization, and Islamism - the radical ideology that seeks the submission of all people to Islamic law - is perhaps the most virulent antidemocratic force in the world today. In Daniel Pipes's phrase, "it is an Islamic-flavored version of totalitarianism." Like other totalitarian cadres, Islamists despise democratic pluralism and liberty in principle, but are quite ready to make use of elections and parliaments as tactical stepping-stones to power.

As with Adolf Hitler in 1933 or the Czechoslovak communists in 1946, Islamists may run for office and hold themselves out as democrats; but once power is in their grasp, they do not voluntarily relinquish it. Just months after Hamas, a self-described "wing of the Muslim Brotherhood," won a majority of seats in the Palestinian elections in 2006, it brutally seized control of the Gaza Strip. More than 30 years after Ayatollah Khomeini

took power in Iran promising representative democracy, the Islamist dictatorship he built remains entrenched.

In Turkey, where secular democratic norms were long enforced by the military, the Islamist Justice and Development Party, or AKP, won the 2002 elections on a platform of moderate democratic conservatism. Since then, however, the AKP has shed its moderate coloration. "The party has turned authoritarian toward the opposition," writes Soner Cagaptay, who heads the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Studies. "Anti-government protestors are beaten up by security forces, opposition figures are wiretapped, and independent papers get slapped with punitive tax fines . . . The AKP has effectively neutered the military. Not just high-ranking officers, but also the government's critics among academics have come under assault, ending up in prison."

If Egypt is to have any hope of a transition to a genuine constitutional democracy, the Muslim Brotherhood must not be treated as a legitimate democratic partner. For more than 80 years, it has been a fervent exponent of Islamic, not secular, rule; of clerical, not democratic, sovereignty. Its credo could hardly be more explicit, or more antidemocratic: "Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. The Koran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

The Muslim Brotherhood's supreme leader has publicly called for raising young "mujaheddin" - holy warriors - "who love to die as much as others love to live and who can perform their duty towards their God, themselves and homeland." This week, senior Brotherhood figure Kamal al-Halbawi said his wish for Egypt is "a good government like the Iranian government, and a good president like Mr. Ahmadinejad, who is very brave."

Democracy is flexible, but even in the best of circumstances it is incompatible with religious totalitarianism. What the Muslim Brotherhood seeks is the very antithesis of democratic pluralism and a free civil society. Egypt's friends must say so, clearly and emphatically.

Will Obama's support for democracy extend beyond Egypt?

Mitchell Bard, Fox News, 8 February 2011

<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/02/08/obamas-support-democracy-extend-egypt/>

President Obama has belatedly come out in favor of "universal values" and called for democratic elections in Egypt. Many Egyptians see his new found interest in their freedom hypocritical given his silence for more than two years while supporting the Mubarak regime. The true test of his policy will not be a transition in Egypt, however, it will be whether the president is prepared to apply these standards elsewhere in the Middle East before crises emerge.

American policy has long granted a "democracy exception" to pro-American Arab autocracies. Besides Egypt, perhaps the most egregious example of ignoring the "universal values" Americans hold dear is U.S. support for Saudi Arabia.

The relationship began a few years after Ibn Saud established his kingdom and American companies discovered oil. Since that time, the Saudi government has led an Arab lobby comprised oil companies and defense contractors, as well as current and former diplomats who believe preserving access to Saudi oil is America's primary interest in the Middle East and that keeping the Saudis happy is vital to protecting that interest.

This lobby has convinced presidents from Roosevelt to Obama to ignore abuses by the regime that include not only the mistreatment of Saudi citizens but discriminatory practices against American Jews and Christians.

The most recent State Department report on human rights documented the following Saudi abuses:

"no right to change the government peacefully; disappearances; torture and physical abuse; poor prison and detention center conditions; arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention; denial of public trials and lack of due process in the judicial system; political prisoners; restrictions on civil liberties such as freedoms of speech (including the Internet), assembly, association, movement, and severe restrictions on religious freedom; and corruption and lack of government transparency. Violence against women, violations of the rights of children, and discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity were common."

America grants the Saudis a "democracy exception" out of fear that a different regime would be worse. That danger is also present in Egypt where it is very possible an Iranian-style Islamist regime could take over from Mubarak if elections are held and yet the president calls for free and fair elections. Why should our policy be different toward Saudi Arabia?

The last president to make human rights a priority in foreign policy was Jimmy Carter, who not only looked the other way at Saudi abuses during his presidency, but became one of the Saudis' leading apologists after leaving office. Not surprisingly, his Carter Center has been the beneficiary of millions of dollars in donations from the Saudis. These "investments" by the Saudis in presidents and former presidents may also help explain the bipartisan record of hypocrisy in harping on the abuses of other countries while ignoring those of the Saudis.

The only president to stand up to the Saudis was John Kennedy who, nearly a century after the U.S. civil war, insisted that they abolish slavery. And the Saudis complied, proving that a determined president could influence the kingdom to give up practices that they may insist are part of their culture or are none of our business.

By contrast, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking for the president, congratulated the Saudis on their National Day for, among other things, "promoting moderation and tolerance."

In his first year, President Obama tried to improve U.S. relations with the Muslim world in a brilliant speech from Cairo expressing his respect for Islam and his intent to break with past policies that created enmity in the region. That outreach effort failed, in part, because he did not recognize that by speaking from the Egyptian capital he was tacitly

supporting the Mubarak regime and sending the message that he was no different from his predecessors who backed autocrats so long as they were pro-American.

If he is to change his image in the region as a hypocrite, he will have to demand that the Saudis and other totalitarian Arab regimes -- besides Egypt -- respect "universal values" and democratize.

Egypt, Israel and the Middle East Merry-Go-Round

Rt Hon James Arbuthnot MP (Chairman of Conservative Friends of Israel and of the Defence Select Committee), Conservative Home Blog, 8 February 2011

<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2011/02/james-arbuthnot-mp-egypt-israel-and-the-middle-east-merry-go-round.html>

The world has been watching the massive protests throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Following the ousting of Tunisia's President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, protests spread into Egypt with dramatic consequences, leading to President Mubarak's assertion that he would not stand again. In Jordan, protests prompted Jordanian King Abdullah to sack his government whilst in Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a key US ally in the battle against Al-Qaeda, called on the opposition to help form a national unity government. With the imminent departure of Mubarak a political vacuum is opening up. Who will fill this vacuum and entrench themselves in a position of power? What effect will this have on peace in the region? And what are the wider security threats emanating from this for Israel and the West?

Although the current unrest did not stem from fundamentalist Islamic elements, the past has taught us that in the absence of the foundations of modern democracy, electorally successful regimes lacking in the central tenants of democracy, often emerge from the pandemonium. In Egypt, there are strong indicators that support for the Islamist movement is growing. The Muslim Brotherhood is a popular force and the only truly organised opposition group. A Pew Poll in December 2010 revealed that when asked if they identified with 'modernisers' or 'Islamists' only 27% of Egyptians surveyed said modernisers, whilst 59% said Islamists. In light of these results, it is apparent that there is sizeable grassroots support for radical Islamism that could be exploited and built upon within Egypt.

Alongside the possibility of an emerging Islamist state, the emergence of a political vacuum in the country has dealt a blow to prospects for Middle East Peace. Egypt is a vital bulwark for peace in the region and has emerged as one of Israel's closest regional allies, having honoured the 1979 peace treaty between the two countries for over thirty years. For Israel, the end of the conflict with the Arab world depends on the durability of the peace with Egypt; for all its limitations it is the only successful model of Israel's central 'land for peace' philosophy. The US and the UK must play a central role in ensuring the peace agreement remains the foundation stone of Egyptian –Israeli bilateral relations, irrespective of who fills the vacuum.

Practically, Egypt has played an important mediating role in efforts to end the fractious split between Fatah and Hamas. They have also taken an active role in preventing terror activity in the Gaza Strip, as well as keeping the border secure. There will be specific concerns about the negative effect a possible new regime could have on the considerable security coordination that currently exists between the two countries. For example, Israeli movement through the Suez Canal could be affected and this would seriously hamper Israel's ability to interdict Hamas arms smuggling from Sudan and elsewhere.

At a time when neither Israel nor the PA is proposing a clear path to peace and there are no direct negotiations, ambiguity in Egypt may lead to further polarisation of the parties. Both the PA and Israel may find it hard to negotiate without Egypt's willing cooperation.

Whilst the possibility of Islamist takeover and uncertainty of Egypt's role in the peace process are disquieting, it is the wider security threats emanating out of the latest crisis that are the most serious cause for concern.

Commentators often contextualise the Middle East as two 'arcs' standing opposite one another in the region. The 'northern arc', consists of Iran, Syria and now Lebanon, whilst the 'southern arc' comprises pro-Western states - including Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the PA and the Persian Gulf states. Within this school of thought, the current unrest in Egypt, and to a lesser extent Jordan and Yemen, stands to weaken the 'southern arc'.

The 'northern arc' states are undemocratic and possess a willingness to use ruthless force to quell discontent, which the pro-Western states lack. Furthermore, they build alliances with other Islamist groups regardless of existing Sunni, Shia ideologies. Shia Iran's close alliance with Sunni Hamas in Gaza demonstrates this flexibility and it plays a key part in explaining their expanding influence in the region.

Contextualising these issues, Israel's northern border emerges as a potential flashpoint. Israel has grown increasingly alarmed by developments in Lebanon. The political crisis has seen the militant Iran-backed Hezbollah cement their power within the political system, acquiring de-facto control of the Lebanese government in recent weeks. The possibility of renewed conflict with Hezbollah or the strategic threat of a sectarian civil war within Lebanon is worrying when one considers the thousands of advanced rockets that the organisation has deployed since the 2006 Lebanon War. The combination of the Iranian determination to develop nuclear weapons capability, the strengthening of Hezbollah, Hamas's tight control of Gaza, the unravelling of the Turkish-Israeli alliance and an Islamist Egypt could produce the prospect of Israel living in a country completely surrounded by Iran's allies or proxies.

We are living in strange and difficult times. 2011 will certainly be a critical juncture in the Middle East and committed support from the UK is imperative. Let's hope that the outcome of the protests will lead to a strengthening of genuine democracy and the Egyptian people's continued commitment to maintain and enhance peaceful relations with Israel and the West. For thirty years Land for Peace with Egypt has provided stability and security for both sides, however, current turmoil means Israel needs to be ready for all eventualities.

Bits and Pieces**Clips from various media in the Middle East and elsewhere**

Jerusalem Post, 4 February: A spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Mohamed Morsy, has declared that the fate of Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel is unclear, and can only be decided upon by the future Egyptian government. When asked whether the Muslim Brotherhood would ever recognize the state of Israel, Morsy accused Israel of "shedding the blood of the Palestinians for more than 60 years." Morsy then added that the Brotherhood "[is] not against the Jews. We are against Zionism. We are against torturing the Palestinian people."