For War or Peace

Issues of war and peace in the twenty first century

Washington's Support for Another Military Leader in Egypt Will Only Firm up Protesters' Resolve Bonnie Bricker and Adil E. Shamoo

http://www.fpif.org/blog/washingtons_support_for_another_military_leader_in_egypt_will_only_firm_up_protesters_resolve

Washington's Support for Another Military Leader in Egypt Will Only Firm up Protesters' Resolve

By Bonnie Bricker and Adil E. Shamoo, February 9, 2011

Stability or freedom? This is the false choice presented by political analysts and government officials as Egyptians protest day after day in their quest for freedom. On the one hand Egypt is described as our valued, strategic pro-Western ally, aligned with our anti-terrorist and Israeli policies. On the other hand, the Mubarak government's record of corruption, restriction of freedoms, imprisonment of political opponents, torture, and abject poverty for tens of millions of Egyptians is in blatant opposition to our American ideals. The conclusion of the wise men is that the U.S. is in a dilemma, walking a tightrope, and in a delicate balance for our diplomacy. So what is the choice for us?

First, there is no choice between supporting freedom and democracy and supporting a despotic regime for eighty million Egyptians. The entire Arab world has entered a period of readiness for revolution, and we must be ready to support their quest for freedom and democracy just as we treasure it ourselves. Second, the claim that our support of despotic regimes is the reason for some stability ignores the current and past instabilities in the region. Third, supporting despotic regimes promotes anti-Western terrorism. Fourth, if we had supported a democratic transformation in Egypt and the Arab world, we may have avoided past wars. And finally, our support and aid to the Egyptian military and other security services for stability is contrary to our values, promoting anti-democratic policies and adding to the corruption endemic to Arab countries.

Our relationship with the military elite is now especially problematic. Egypt's top generals were trained in our military colleges, and we have maintained our relationships with them. While some may see this as a distinct advantage, the Egyptian people also see the billions of US dollars given to the Egyptian military as money used to maintain control over any political opposition. Current discussions about the transition of Mubarak to his newly-appointed vice president, Omar Suleiman, only serve to magnify our support for the repressive regime. Suleiman, the former military general and director of an intelligence service known for torture of dissidents, is not trusted by the dissidents. Yet, indications are that the U.S. would be very happy with Suleiman's leadership. Our focus on the military for a solution is pregnant with risks since they are the privileged class and have benefited from the regime's corrupt practices.

In the past two weeks, US officials have issued many statements reflecting not only the changing situation in Egypt, but our own ambivalence with practical and moral imperatives. Secretary Clinton claimed that the regime is stable. President Obama expressed the need for an

immediate transition plan, allowing for Egyptians to determine their future. But the most disturbing comment came (amid the reports of deaths and injuries among the demonstrators) from the administration's special envoy Frank Wisner: Mubarak must remain in the transition period to ensure stability. While the administration slightly distanced themselves from Mr. Wisner's comments, it appears that many in the West were aligned with his statement. To those demonstrators, and the rest of Egypt waiting for its first breath of freedom, the disappointment must be deep.

The Tahrir square revolution has already succeeded in many fronts. The demonstration in the tens and hundreds of thousands in Tahrir square has continued unabated for two weeks. The demonstrators held to a peaceful path despite the provocation by government thugs. On 2/6/2011, Christians held mass in Tahrir square chanting, "we are one nation" and Muslims protected their Christian brethren – bringing a tear to the eye of many Christian Arabs. For the first time, Mr. Mubarak declared he would not run for another term in the coming September. Moreover, his son Jamal Mubarak will not succeed him. The people of Egypt are no longer afraid to challenge the instruments of oppression – the security forces. Mr. Suleiman has already met, for the first time, with many of the opposition leaders and agreed to form a Committee on Constitutional Reforms. Finally, there are discussions of removing the emergency law ruling Egypt since 1981.

It appears that the U.S. administration's desire is for Suleiman's power to increase and for Mubarak's to gradually diminish. The U.S. will support this transition to democracy as long as it does not threaten any of our interests in the Middle East. But there is so much at stake. As Americans, we must ask ourselves: isn't the liberty that we cherish worth the risk?