

Washington: How Best to Shape the Middle East Playing Field?

Any new government in Egypt will be anti-Israel...

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Quiet tourist backwater Tunisia under its only rulers since independence — Habib Bourghiba (1956-1987) and then Zein Al-Abidine bin Ali (1987-2011) — was a much appreciated ally of the United States. However, as bin Ali fled to Saudi Arabia last month, US leaders suddenly were hailing those who defied his US-trained police with their US-made tear gas and guns, including the 100 they killed.

Two weeks later, after almost identical developments in Egypt, the US found itself poised to repeat itself, praising the now millions of protesters, including at least 300 who so far have died, though stopping short of pushing Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) to follow his colleague's steps into exile, fearing the collapse of its Middle East order.

Now mainstream US pundits strategise about how best to shape the new political playing field to continue to meet US needs. In the New York Times Mark Landler worries about "potentially dangerous directions" for the US. He quotes United States President Barack Obama's new special envoy to Tunisia Jeffrey Feltman on the need to "support pro-democracy forces", though Daniel Shapiro cautions against "a cookie-cutter ideal of how to approach it". And Aaron Miller tells Landler they must find the right balance between "identifying the US too closely with these changes" (read: continuing to support the government) and at the same time "not finding ways to nurture them enough" (read: controlling the pro-democracy activists).

Martin Indyk, adviser to Obama's Middle East envoy George Mitchell and former ambassador to Israel, weighed in definitively on Egypt in a CNN interview 30 January when he called Mubarak "a dead man walking", saying "We have to get on the right side of history." In other words, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

Even without a "cookie-cutter" it is clear in Cairo that the Landlers and Indyks advising Washington on its policies towards Arab countries are following a well-defined recipe not concerned with Arab democracy, but Israel's best interests, even as the policy zigs one way and zags another.

That bin Ali's staunch support for the US war against Islam (excuse me, "terrorism") just might be an important reason why Tunisians risked life and limb to overthrow him hardly seems to enter the US radar screen. Bin Ali's willingness to persecute his own people while serving US Middle East interests also goes a long way towards explaining his lack of qualms about stealing their wealth and ignoring their basic needs.

Ditto Egypt. Shapiro's insistence that no cookie-cutter is adequate to the complexities of the Middle East is belied by both the uniformity of US Arab allies' domestic and foreign policies and the quick succession of almost identical protests. The last 30 years have witnessed a cookie-cutter scenario of a US-supported secular government which persecuted Islamists and opened the nation to the depredations of neoliberalism and tourism through a US-educated and armed elite which amassed vast fortunes. It is hardly surprising that the dispossessed finally exploded in fury.

There are differences — Egypt has a large peasantry, by definition conservative. But it also has memories of socialism — land reform and the relative equality of the days of Gamal Abdel-Nasser. In addition, Egypt has a long history of political plurality. Spurred on by mass movements Kefaya (Enough), ElBaradei's National Association for Change, and the April 6 Youth Movement, the venerable Wafd (Delegation) Party, the Muslim Brotherhood and several more recent secular parties such as Al-Ghad (Tomorrow) and Tagammu (Alliance) will hit the political ground running when the dust finally clears after Egypt's popular uprising.

By all rights Egypt is the most important player in the Middle East, but since president Anwar Sadat signed the Camp David accord in 1979, Egypt has been intimately tied to the US as the only Arab country, along with Jordan, to sign a peace treaty and recognise Israel, and thus was sidelined. The revolution of January 2011 has suddenly thrust Egypt back into the Middle East's "great game", much as the ascendancy of Nasser in 1952 in reaction to British domination made it a key player in that era's great game.

As it has done throughout the post-WWII period, Washington is hedging its political bets. Until the last moment in both Tunisia and Egypt, it strongly supported the government despite an increasing pattern of repression and corruption in both countries, while also backing and financing the regimes' detractors, primarily through the activities of Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), recognising that the end must come at some point.

According to a Wikileaks 6 December 2007 cable posted by Norway's Aftenposten, USAID budgeted \$66.5 million dollars in 2008 and \$75 million in 2009 to Egyptian programmes promoting "democracy and good governance". "President Mubarak is deeply sceptical of the US role in democracy promotion," reads another cable from the US embassy in Cairo dated 9 October 2007. "Nonetheless, (US government) programmes are helping to establish democratic institutions and strengthen individual voices for change in Egypt."

Virtually an adjunct of the CIA, the NED funnels funds to all the region's countries. In 2009 it gave grants to more than a dozen opposition groups, including Al-Jahedh Forum for Free Thought, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, the Arab Foundation for Supporting Civil Society, the Arab Society for Human Rights, the Egyptian Union of Liberal Youth, the Project on Middle East Democracy and the Youth Forum. The complete list is at ned.org/where-we-work/middle-east-and-northern-africa/Egypt.

Under the auspices of Freedom House's New Generation programme Egyptian visiting fellows from civil society groups came to the US for training in 2008, including meetings with US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and White House National Security adviser Stephen Hadley. In May 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met a delegation of Egyptian dissidents, just prior to Obama's visit to Egypt. Sixteen activists met with Clinton and Acting

Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman as part of a two-month fellowship.

However, even as the governing National Democratic Party's rule falters, the US has prevaricated, scrambling to regain control of the political process, clearly concerned that its chosen democratic protégés were perhaps not that reliable (or in control), that the pro-democracy movement could well end up in a new government reversing Egypt's pro-Western policy.

It goes without saying that the world's sole superpower does not want to let such an important player as Egypt go its own way. But officials should remember that the term "blowback" was coined by the CIA itself, and its relevance only increases over time. Yes, any new government in Egypt will be anti-Israel. Yes, it will have a strong Muslim Brotherhood presence.

But, ironically, this new face for Egypt is one that any US president should embrace, and not just cynically like Indyk. It will force Israel to finally negotiate a reasonable peace with Palestine, giving backbone to other Arab governments, and — most important — undercutting the Indyks. It will be the US president's best ally in the long run.

An openly operating Muslim Brotherhood will contribute in a host of ways to solving Egypt's horrendous poverty and social degradation, giving Muslims a new confidence and pride. Sectarian problems, also ironically, will fade as Muslims take control of their lives after decades of neocolonial humiliation.

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