CRISIS IN EGYPT
How Should the United States Respond?

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Chaos engulfs a Middle Eastern country, catching the international community by surprise. People take to the streets, demanding the removal of a leader who is an important American ally. Protestors scream in their native Persian, “Death to the Shah”…This is Tehran over 30 years ago, and the events that lead up to and follow the departure of the Shah from Iran have important lessons for American policymakers responding to the ongoing crisis in Egypt.

The current uprising in Egypt is not the first time the United States is left in an uncomfortable position of supporting a regime that is domestically unpopular. A few years before the Iranian Revolution, President Carter in 1973 proclaimed that Iran is an “an island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world.” Just two years before, the Shah hosted one of the century’s most lavish events, the “2,500 Year Celebration of the Persian Empire” for the world’s glitterati and royalty. This event would later come to symbolize the ostentatious monarchy out of touch with its unhappy populace. Today, Egyptians similarly express their anger against a leadership that has done little for the advancement of rule of law, democratic practices, and human rights. The immediate assessment by Washington that referred to the situation in Egypt as “stable,” along with the news that tear gas canisters used to suppress protestors carry “Made in America” emblems, depicts an America complicit in the dictatorial rule of Egypt.

The paradigm in which the United States currently finds itself leaves few favorable options. If the United States takes a strong stand on the side of the protestors, it risks weakening strategic allies and appearing capricious. On the other hand, by siding with a regime that would keep President Mubarak in power, the United States loses credibility and appears hypocritical in the eyes of the Egyptian people. Both President Obama in his recent speech and Secretary Clinton in her interviews with the Sunday morning talk shows performed a diplomatic balancing act that made Washington seem to be trying to have it both ways—having its cake and eating it too.

While such measured and careful rhetoric is good diplomacy, as it allows the United States to gather more information before committing to a more refined policy, the events in Egypt and other parts of the region come as little surprise—the question was not if these revolts will take place, but when and how they will come about. This is a crisis that is likely to repeat itself in other countries, and the conundrum American finds itself at the moment will be a leitmotiv for American engagement with the region for years to come.

Understandably, the United States has lots to be concerned about because the stakes are very high. Should a newly formed government in Egypt decide to reverse the peace commitments with Israel, progress in the Middle East crisis would be severely backtracked—by more than 30 years. Moreover, Mubarak’s government has proved to be a reliable ally with regards to counterterrorism, and has shared the United States’ concern for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.
Other legitimate fears for the United States include those unintended and unforeseeable events that can derail a fragile democratic transition. The history of previous revolutions illustrates an important lesson: bringing down a government is the easy part when compared to the ensuing task of building a democratic order. The Iranian Revolution serves as a classic example of this, in which theocratic elements came to dominate only in the later stages of the revolution. Today, the theological regime in power is not the democratic government Iranians so desperately sought when they took to the streets over three decades ago. Another case of usurped revolutions is the Russian Revolution in October 1917, in which communist Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government that was established by the February Revolution of that same year.

As for Egypt, Mohammed ElBaradei has tried to reassure those with concerns about the role of the Muslim Brotherhood by arguing that the vernacular of the current revolt is not religious, but secular. Although Dr. ElBaradei admirably champions change for Egypt, it should be noted that the Iranian Revolution also began in a secular, coalition-based, and democratic tone. Of course, it would be wrong to over simply the comparisons between Egypt and Iran, as the two countries have different historical trajectories, religious hierarchies, and cultures. Even so, an important similarity is that much like the Shah, Mubarak crippled political dissent, which empowered the Mosque to become the only legitimate institution to house opposition politics. After decades of harboring those who disagree with Mubarak, Egypt’s Mosque is determined to gain a seat at the table.

Ultimately, the Egyptian Army will play a large role in determining Egypt’s fate. The army is in a peculiar position, not only as an institution that benefits from Mubarak’s strong reign, but also as an establishment that must heed the country’s drastic call for change. The army’s role in facilitating a possible transition will be critical, as this elite sector of society is an influential power broker. Unlike the example of Iran that serves as an ominous model for Egypt, a positive example for Egypt is Turkey, in which the army plays an important function in preserving the secular democracy, despite the recent rise of Islamist politics.

Revolts and revolutions are no doubt messy, chaotic, and sometimes dangerous. At the same time, such political schisms are inevitable. Thus, instead of a policy that places too much emphasis on blanket support for regimes that are unpopular, the United States should actively prepare a “Plan B” for the day when pro-American leaders are no longer in power. Only by positioning itself in a way that minimizes the negative implications of a transition in government, the United States will be able to weather the political storms ahead in the Middle East.