

Egypt and Post Affluent America

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It is only a few days after the resignation of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and demonstrations have already spread to much of the Middle East with several governments including those in Libya and Bahrain appearing to be on the verge of collapsing. It is possible that the regimes in Libya and Bahrain will right themselves and find a way to stay in power, but it seems more likely that at least one of these countries, and perhaps others in the region, will, like Egypt and Tunisia, see a resignation or abdication soon.

These developments could have a dramatic effect on global politics, changing political alliances, alignments and regimes throughout the Middle East. A democratic wave, anti-American backlash, strengthened Islamist movement presence, consolidation by new secular authoritarian governments or numerous different combinations of these possibilities are all potential outcomes in Tunisia, Egypt and perhaps elsewhere. At any time, these developments would raise an extraordinary challenge for U.S. policy makers eager to ensure American interests are defended and that human rights and democracy are expanded. The U.S. would also be preparing to become involved in the evolution of new political systems and structures in each of these countries offering money, resources, and expertise. Not surprisingly, these sentiments have been reflected, almost implicit, in much of what the Obama administration has said about these events thus far.

This is not, however, any time. We are in a moment not just of declining American influence and wealth, but of an increasing awareness, even among the American people, of this declining influence and wealth. Thus, the challenge of responding to events in the Middle East has become exponentially more complex because they represent the first real test of post-affluent American. Talk of being committed to building strong democracies in the Middle East, for example, must be tempered by the economic reality that we don't have any money with which to do this, as well as the political reality that a substantial, and probably growing, proportion of Americans don't want to borrow more money from China to do this.

The U.S. obviously can still afford democracy and civil society support programs, but this is only part of the expense the U.S. will need to make if it seeks to play an instrumental role in the next iteration of the Middle East. That would require making new commitments to new governments and possibly providing massive economic support, particularly in Egypt, to ensure that new, elected governments can be successful. There would also be unforeseen expenses as new governments asked for things like military hardware or, in worst case scenarios, being pulled into costly conflicts between various factions in some of these countries. Of course, even if the U.S. agreed to invest these resources, political outcomes would be uncertain. This point will not be lost on an American electorate may, understandably, be a little gun shy about investing large

sums of money into reinventing domestic political arrangements in countries of the Middle East.

The notion that the U.S. must take a lead role in addressing any international political challenge is almost a reflexive American response to any major event in the world, but it is a leftover from the end of the Cold War and the immediate aftermath when the world was a far more unipolar place and when the U.S. had a lot more money. That is no longer the world in which international politics occurs. The extent to which this attitude is either wise or feasible is no longer clear. Moreover, the U.S. needs to be additionally careful because the wave of demonstrations across the Middle East has brought one of the central paradoxes of 21st century international political life into stark clarity. The U.S. is uniquely blamed, by many across the world, for myriad problems, such as the long time survival of regimes like Mubarak's, while also being viewed by many, including some of the same people, as uniquely able to solve problems such as rebuilding post-Mubarak Egypt. This is, to a large degree, a triumph of spin, propaganda and perceptions over reality, but it still significant. To some extent, then, the biggest challenge facing the U.S. in the new Middle East will be to recognize that we can no longer do as much as we would like, while still being viewed as a uniquely powerful player. This will not be easy.