

Iran, Syria and Egypt

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During the last weeks, three issues in the Middle East have become increasingly significant. The heightened tension between the U.S. and Iran, leading to more talk of possible war between the two countries, the violence in Syria as the authoritarian Assad regime continues to crack down on opposition members and other citizens there, and the detainment and now looming trial of 19 Americans, and several others working for American political development NGOs, in Egypt have all been front page news for several days. At first glance they seem like three very different types of problems: one is a conflict between two states, one is about a government committing violent acts against its own citizens and one is a more complex issue of American citizens being charged with interfering in the domestic affairs of another country.

There are, however, some common themes across these issues which frame the broader U.S. role in the Middle East. All three of these cases demonstrate the inability of the U.S. to get what it wants from other countries in the region. Iran and the U.S. have not had a good relationship for decades so it is no surprise that the U.S. has proven unsuccessful in its efforts to dissuade Iran from pursuing its nuclear weapons plan.

The other two cases are, at least in this regard, more significant. Despite an aversion, until recently, to being frank about the violence and brutality of the Assad regime, the U.S. has been completely unable to influence Assad's behavior as he has taken increasingly violent measures against his own people. Of equal import is the inability of the U.S. to persuade permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Russia to support the resolution asking Assad to resign.

Egypt is, in some respects, the most intriguing of the three cases. The decision of the Egyptian authorities to detain people working with major American democracy assistance organizations is very unusual, particularly for a country that, like Egypt, enjoys a good relationship with, and receives ample assistance from, the U.S. In this context the failure of Egypt to release those prisoners in the face of mounting pressure from the U.S. is even more puzzling.

The U.S. is asking, without success, for the Iranian, Syrian, Russian and Chinese governments to do things that, from their perspective, are not in their interests. It is not really a big surprise that Iran is not giving up their weapons because the U.S. wants them to or that Moscow and Beijing are less anxious than the U.S. to call for a leader to resign because he has used excessive force on the citizens of his own country. The U.S., on the other hand, is asking Egypt to do something that is neither against their interests nor a very big request.

The new government of Egypt probably does not share the American view that the involvement of U.S. based organizations working to help make Egypt become more democratic is essential for Egypt's development. Moreover, Egyptians may see the U.S. as having supported Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian government rather than as having played a role in political breakthroughs in Egypt. However, the Egyptian government, which still seems happy to receive assistance from the U.S. and to have relatively strong ties with the U.S. in other areas, notably

the military, has behaved clumsily and excessively on this issue. It is unclear why the presence of U.S. democracy organizations which most governments in similar situations view as a minor, but necessary, inconvenience has drawn such an overblown and hostile response from the Egyptian government.

The failure of the U.S. to stop Egypt from detaining, and now possibly trying, these nineteen Americans is yet another case of the U.S. not being able to persuade a recipient of U.S. assistance to cooperate with the U.S. Recipients of U.S. assistance, particularly when they are large and powerful countries like Egypt cannot be expected to support the U.S. on everything, but this is a relatively minor, although highly symbolic, incident where Egyptian cooperation does not seem like it should be beyond the expectations of the U.S.

The inability of the U.S. to get what it wants in the Middle East on issues both relatively large and relatively minor is further evidence of the failure of American policy of continuing to behave like a lone superpower in an increasingly multi-polar world. China and Russia are almost certainly going to continue charting their own courses in the Middle East and elsewhere and so will continue to be able to block U.S. action on the security council and to offer regimes, including those as dreadful as the ones in Teheran and Damascus, alternatives to cooperating with the U.S. This is probably unavoidable in a multi-polar world, but events like those in Egypt raise a different set of concerns and limits on American influence and power.