

# WebMemo



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## Five Steps to Meeting the Crisis in Egypt and the Middle East

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While all eyes are on the political violence in Egypt, the Obama Administration has labored in crisis mode, struggling to stay ahead of the rapidly moving events. Washington's problem is that publicly the White House appears to be floundering, focusing myopically on events on Tahrir Square rather than exercising real presidential leadership and proactively working to safeguard America's long-term vital interests in the region.

By exercising energetic leadership now and continuing to engage in the right way in the months ahead, the President can both protect U.S. interests and promote opportunities for liberty, security, and economic opportunity in the region. These actions would be far more likely to make a positive contribution than trying to appear relevant to the struggle for power in the streets of Cairo.

A responsible agenda for the Administration would include the following actions.

**1. Don't Lose Focus on Iran.** The nuclear aspirations of the regime in Tehran is not the region's only problem. The Iranian government sponsors terrorism and an extremist agenda across the region and suppresses the aspirations of freedom from its own people. The height of hypocrisy is leaders in Tehran declaring sympathy for those in the streets of Cairo when they brutally suppressed the cries for liberty in their own country during its own 2009 election protests.

The Iranian regime is dangerous when left unchecked. Pushing back on Tehran is the only way to counter its quest for regional dominance. In par-

ticular, although technical problems may have slightly delayed Iran's nuclear timetable, Washington cannot grow complacent about Iran's nuclear program. The Obama Administration should maximize the enforcement of U.S. sanctions on companies that invest in Iran's energy sector or export gasoline to Iran, especially Chinese companies that may seek to replace European firms that are pulling out of Iran.

The United States should also push for another round of U.N. sanctions after Iran again spurned diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear issue at the Istanbul talks last month. The Obama Administration also should step up its support for Iran's democratic opposition, which it has mistakenly given short shrift, especially compared to the Egyptian opposition. Moreover, it should rally international condemnation of Iran's human rights abuses, which far exceed the abuses that it has decried in Egypt.

**2. Remain Firmly Committed to Preserving a Stable and Free Iraq.** Now is not the time to risk the emergence of a new center of instability in the region or risk losing a friendly nation that is struggling to secure its own freedom from tyranny. Although it has fallen off the front pages, Iraq

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remains a troubled country that requires continued high-level attention. While Iraq's security situation has greatly improved, political progress has been slow in coming. Iraqi leaders have tentatively cobbled together a coalition government after last year's elections, but it remains to be seen whether that government can effectively address Iraq's complex problems.

Washington should stand patiently by the Iraqi government to support its army and police, help it provide better services to Iraq's people, mediate disputes between Kurds and Arabs, and prevent it from falling under Iran's hostile influence. The U.S. should maintain the strongest possible military forces until the end of 2011, when they are required to withdraw under the status of forces agreement. Washington should quietly seek to negotiate a new agreement to permit the stationing of U.S. military forces for training and assisting Iraq's military forces in combating common enemies such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and pro-Iranian Shiite militias.

**3. Reassert the Need for Close Strategic Cooperation with Israel.** The political instability that has swept the Arab Middle East in recent weeks underscores the fact that Israel is the only ally in the region that the U.S. can reliably count on. The Obama Administration should continue its efforts to revive the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks but should refocus its diplomacy by abandoning its unrealistic one-year deadline for attaining a peace agreement and its counterproductive push for an immediate freeze on settlements, which only encouraged the Palestinian Authority to hold back from negotiations.

Instead of an all-out push for a comprehensive settlement, which is impossible as long as Hamas controls Gaza, Washington should press for incremental progress on security arrangements, confidence-building measures, and bolstering the welfare of Palestinians on the West Bank. This would help shore up support for the Palestinian Authority at the expense of Hamas, which has transformed Gaza into a repressive base for terrorism.

**4. Stay Engaged in Lebanon.** Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria, flexed its muscles last month to bring down the pro-Western government of Saad Hariri on the day he met with President Obama in

the White House. Lebanon, which has long served as a cockpit for the clashing proxies of regional powers, is now drifting deeper into the Iranian orbit. The Obama Administration should vigilantly stay engaged and support the Christian and Sunni Muslim coalition against Hezbollah.

Washington should also strongly support the U.N.-authorized Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which is expected to charge Hezbollah officials with responsibility for the 2005 assassination of then-Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Saad's father. No calm is likely to come to Lebanon, or the wider region, as long as Hezbollah and its backers believe that they can literally get away with murder.

**5. Support and Encourage Egypt's Army to Safeguard a Transition to Freedom.** While the U.S. addresses other priorities, it cannot, of course, ignore what is going on in Cairo. But it should start focusing solutions that will play out over the long term rather than trying to keep up with today's headlines and last minute's tweets. Egypt's army, the backbone of the state since the 1952 Free Officers coup, is the arbiter of Egypt's future in the current crisis. If it continues to indefinitely stand behind embattled President Hosni Mubarak, then it risks splintering into factions or seeing its troops join the angry crowds.

To preserve the army as a bulwark of stability and a future barrier to an Islamist takeover, it would be helpful if President Mubarak stepped down to calm the tense political situation and make possible a stable transition to a more representative government. The U.S. should leverage its \$1.5 billion annually in aid to ensure that whatever regime emerges in Cairo respects the freedom and human rights of its own citizens, particularly those of women and Egypt's Christian minority, which comprises about 10 percent of Egypt's population.

U.S. aid should also be conditioned on continued Egyptian compliance with its legal obligations under its 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Over the long term, U.S. aid and foreign military sales will be important. The Egyptian military will not be able to maintain readiness without the spare parts, logistical support, and equipment upgrades that the U.S. provides.

**Shifting Focus.** This is an agenda that the White House could embark upon today that would make a big difference in the Middle East. It would demonstrate that the U.S. is:

- A faithful, responsible, and enduring ally,
- A champion of supporting the cause of liberty and economic freedom, and
- A strong, resilient, and confident nation prepared to defend itself, its allies, and its interests.

If the Oval Office shifts its focus from what will sell best in the White House press room to what is best to keep Americans free, safe, and secure, it will weather this crisis well.

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