

Engage Islamists Without Fear

Hillary Clinton's recent meeting with Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi is a historic development in relations between Washington and Arab Islam.

The meeting was the first time ever that a senior U.S. policymaker met a democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood-based president of Egypt. It culminates a 10-year soul searching by Washington about how to deal with mainstream Arab Islamists as they enter government through lawful means.

The rejection of Hamas' electoral victory in 2006, which some argue has led to the 2008-09 Gaza war, was justified on the grounds that Hamas was considered a terrorist organization under U.S. law. This does not apply to the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoot organizations in and outside Egypt.

While the meeting is a very important step for both the United States and Egypt, the administration's insipid position toward the continuing power grab by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces leaves Egyptians and other Arabs wondering about America's real commitment to democratic transition in the Arab world.

Some are attributing Washington's irresolute posture toward the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and other undemocratic Arab regimes to one or all of the following three factors: real politic considerations; the autocracy addiction disease; or America's diminishing leverage in post-authoritarian governments.

These factors might explain insipidity, but do not justify it. More worrisome, rising anti-Americanism and potential terrorist threats to our people could be an unintended consequence of our perceived tolerance of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt and similar undemocratic rule in remaining Arab states.

Washington's adjusting to the new realities as the Arab Spring goes through the seasons should be predicated on different assumptions in our foreign relations.

First, real politic should be redefined to include a real shift away from ossified dictators.

Second, we should exorcise ourselves of the autocracy addiction of dealing with pliable autocrats and reassert our belief in the usefulness of democracies.

The often-repeated claim by Arab dictators that their societies are exceptional and Arab peoples are not interested in or unable to handle democracy has bitten the dust. The people power that emanated from Arab protests is destined to lead to a more liberating Arab world – economically, politically and socially.

Third, the argument that America needs the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and other authoritarian regimes in the region because of our perceived diminishing leverage is fallacious. America's values of democracy, liberty and the rule of law underpin our regional influence, which Washington should use to bolster its posture against tyranny. If such a moral posture should anger the remaining Arab autocrats – whether in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria and elsewhere – so be it.

When I established and directed the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program at the CIA almost a decade ago, the central theme of the briefings my colleagues and I gave to senior policymakers was that engaging Islamist political parties, both Sunni and Shia, in the long run serves our national interest. The displeasure shown by some regimes toward such engagement should not deter us from reaching out to indigenous, credible civil society institutions, including Islamic political parties.

Based on meetings with Muslim interlocutors and public opinion polls, we also briefed that engaging the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic parties would show Arab and Muslim publics that the United States was moving away from painting the whole Islamic world with a broad brush of terrorism. The key condition for engagement was that these parties would have to be committed to inclusion, tolerance and respect for human rights, including the rights of women and religious minorities. This is why the secretary of state's meeting with Morsi is so historic.

Once in parliament, these parties will have to show that their legislative pragmatism would trump their Islamist ideology. If they don't deliver on jobs, stability, entrepreneurship, better education, economic growth and political reform, they will not win majorities or large pluralities in future elections.

Washington should therefore engage these parties with caution but without fear. Once the Assad regime falls, our policymakers should take a similar approach to whichever Islamic parties are elected to the Syrian parliament.

*By Dr. Emile A. Nakhleh / Research Professor, University of New Mexico in Albuquerque
Journal on Thu, Jul 19, 2012*

Emile A. Nakhleh is a former director of the CIA Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program. He is the author of "A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relations with the Muslim World."