Why Egypt Matters

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By Owen Sirrs on behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

Egypt has been getting a lot of press lately and our television sets have been filled with images of pro-democracy demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities. So far the Egyptian government’s response to these protests has been disjointed and contradictory, blending promises of reform as carrots and tanks and camel-borne thugs as sticks. For its part the United States has clearly been caught off-guard by the courage and determination of the protesters in the face of regime intimidation.

So what is at stake in Egypt and why should we as Americans care? At first glance the answer should be intuitively obvious: Egypt is a vital U.S. ally in the Middle East, it has a peace treaty with Israel, it is the most populous country in the Arab world and it commands a vital global maritime link called the Suez Canal. Yet it was not that long ago that our leaders neglected Egypt for the sake of more pressing problems in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. It seemed as if the U.S.-Egyptian relationship forged by Henry Kissinger and sealed at Camp David under Jimmy Carter, was on auto-pilot and very much taken for granted.

Unfortunately, we neglected Egypt at our peril. While our attention was focused on wars against Iraq or terrorism, our Egyptian ally quietly sputtered along under a sclerotic, aging leadership that was steadily losing legitimacy with its people. The consequences of this neglect are now starkly obvious, and our leaders have been forced to revisit facts that have lain dormant since the Carter Administration, namely that Egypt is a pivotal but increasingly fragile U.S. ally in a volatile region plagued by perils and pitfalls. Egypt is a trend-setter and bellwether of the Arab world. Indeed, it has been
proven time and again that where Egypt goes in terms of political development and regional alliances is where other Arab regimes are likely to follow. The consequences of Egypt’s current crisis for regional and international stability are enormous.

And that just scratches the surface of why Egypt is important to us. On one level, Egypt’s 1979 peace treaty with Israel set the stage for two decades of U.S. efforts to forge an enduring peace in the Middle East. On another the Egyptian government routinely grants our military trouble-free transit of the Suez Canal which facilitates the rapid movement of U.S. forces to Kuwait, Iraq, the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Egypt also has consistently permitted over-flights of its territory by U.S. aircraft on their way to and from combat zones in the Middle East and South Asia. In 1990 Egypt was one of the first to join the U.S.-led coalition that ousted Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the Egyptian government was careful to restrict most of its criticism of American policies to diplomatic channels. More recently, the Egyptian government has incurred the displeasure of its own citizens as well as other Arabs by helping Israel limit the trafficking of arms into the Gaza Strip. Finally, Egypt has been a staunch – if controversial – ally in our war against al-Qaeda.

O.K. so Egypt is clearly important to American interests. So let’s get back to those demonstrators in Cairo and other cities who have captivated Americans with their resiliency and bravery. Their demands for a democratic Egypt free from secret police, perpetual states of emergency, corrupt officials, and ‘Presidents for life’ remind us of our own cherished values and what we hope will one day take root in the Middle East. Indeed, a functioning Egyptian democracy would be a powerful example for other Arab states to follow. It would also be a stable, albeit more independent-minded
friend of the U.S. with a greater willingness to be frank and open in criticizing some of our regional policies. And that can only be a good thing.

This is Owen Sirrs from the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana.

Thank you for listening.