

Washington must deal with Arab reality

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As I write this it seems we are on the verge of a post-Mubarak Egypt. President Hosni Mubarak has been part of Egypt's and the region's political furniture for so long that it is hard to imagine what things will be like when he is gone.

A post-Mubarak Middle East will, however, be a dramatically different region, at once more hopeful and more dangerous.

I say this not to make an each-way bet on the region's future, but to underline that the chief implication of Mubarak's departure is to sweep away old certainties and assumptions. And in this new uncertainty lies the possibility that some things in the region will get better and some will get worse.

There are two obvious areas where Mubarak's departure would be most keenly felt. First, it would have a profound impact on domestic Arab politics for years to come.

There is no doubt that the protests in Egypt were stimulated by the so-called "jasmine revolution" in Tunisia. But with all due respect to Tunisians, Egypt is not a small North African state on the margins of the Arab world.

If the ruler of the Arab world's biggest country, with a hitherto proficient security apparatus and backed by the world's superpower, can be toppled by popular protest, then no regional dictator is safe. That is not to say that all Arab despots will suffer the fate of former Tunisian president Ben Ali, and probably, soon, Mubarak.

Each Arab country is different, not every one is facing the same type or scale of popular discontent, and even if they were, some will handle it better than others.

Nevertheless, in the same way that events in Tunisia clearly messed with the mind of Mubarak, illustrated by his decision to put his army on the streets after only a few days of protest, Mubarak's ouster will play even more deeply in the minds of his fellow Arab autocrats.

In some cases, like Jordan, this may cause rulers to become more responsive and reformist (at least for a while). In others, like Libya and possibly Syria, they will become even more repressive.

But adopting the latter approach would be a serious mistake.

Something new is flowering in the Arab political desert. It is a conviction that for people's lives to change, no matter what their particular complaint, whether it is corruption or rising food prices or internet censorship, long-time leaders have to be forced out.

Moreover, many of the region's autocrats have lost their most powerful weapon in defence of the status quo: not their security forces, but the resignation of their own people. Up until recently most Arab citizens were convinced that there was nothing they could do to bring about change. That has now changed, even if to differing degrees in different countries.

But it is not just Arab domestic politics that will feel the effects of a post-Mubarak Middle East.

Cairo's days as the region's most important capital may have been waning, but many of the region's strategic and political certainties were built on the role played by its dour and deliberate President.

After extremists assassinated Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who made peace with Israel, it was Mubarak who consolidated an albeit cold peace between the two countries and who helped entrench the regional realities that the treaty had created.

That peace hardly rid the region of war and conflict, but it did bring to an end the prospect of more Israeli-Arab wars on the scale fought in 1948, 1967 and 1973.

Israel will now have to add deep fear over what may come after Mubarak to the already long list of its worries, including Iran's nuclear program, Hezbollah's domination of Lebanon and the recent discrediting of its tame counterpart in the Palestinian territories (over the leak of the so-called "Palestine Papers"). The first instinct of many Israelis will be to find security in its military and rally around a strong leader. But the end of old certainties may also reinvigorate those Israelis who argue that the country's security lies not in building higher fences, but in making risky and courageous overtures to its neighbours.

Of course, it is by no means certain that the first act of Mubarak's successors will be to tear up the peace treaty with Israel, but such logic will do little to reassure nervous Israelis.

Here the Obama administration in the United States will have a critical role to play in ensuring the region's new democratic possibilities do not degenerate into demagoguery and discord.

To do that the administration's temptation may be to repackage old regimes in new pseudo-democratic plastic. This would be a mistake and President Barack Obama needs to more rapidly move beyond the fine diplomatic line he has so far been walking over the protests in Egypt.

It is no easy thing to abandon the old certainties and personalities that served US interests in the region pretty well (and even if this incubated some nasty byproducts, like Islamist extremism), especially when it is not clear what you are abandoning them for. Nevertheless, America's, and the West's, interest are better served by backing change rather than resisting it, even if it means re-imagining or recalibrating what some of these interests are.

US influence in the Middle East is often overstated, but it is clearly not non-existent. It is better for American power to work in partnership with the region's people and emerging leaders to create a new regional reality, rather than for US influence and interests to be this new reality's chief victims.

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