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Dark Days In Mideast Test US Policy

By Nicholas Burns

ONE YEAR after the Arab revolutions began with so much promise, the trends have turned darkly ominous in the two key countries at the heart of the Middle East - Egypt and Syria. At this time last year, many of us hoped we might be witnessing the start of the most significant and positive change in the Arab world since the creation of the modern Middle East after the First World War. But events are now moving quickly in the opposite direction, highlighting the sharply reduced influence of the United States, until recently the most important outside power. Horrific violence in Syria's civil war and a looming showdown between Islamists and the military in Egypt point to a Middle East more troubled than stable and more violent than peaceful in the year ahead.

Egypt has always been the region's most important country and America's most valued Arab partner. But the military government that still holds power threatened last week to prosecute 19 Americans who have worked for US-government-supported organizations on democracy promotion. Despite a personal plea from President Obama, Egyptian authorities are refusing to drop these malicious and trumped-up charges. This crisis illustrates the limits of American credibility with Egypt's generals, who have been given billions in US military assistance over three decades but now ignore us when American citizens are in trouble.

The resounding electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist parties presents Obama with another dilemma. If the new government puts the Americans on trial or weakens the Camp David Accords with Israel, congressional leaders will be tempted to cut off American aid to Egypt. But, as the Washington Post's David Ignatius warned last week, this is where we need to take a deep breath and reflect soberly before we act. If we burn our bridges with Egypt's new leaders before they take office, we may lose all hope of building even minimal confidence and trust for the future. America may need to rely more on its patience than power on the rollercoaster ride ahead with Egypt.

In Syria, the world is watching the most brutal attacks by an Arab government against its own people since the uprisings began. It is heartbreaking to see the shelling and shooting of innocent Syrians. The United States, however, has few cards to play. Russia and China cynically blocked a mild UN Security Council resolution condemning Syrian President Bashar Assad's use of armed force against protesters. Neither of the conditions that permitted NATO to protect besieged Libyans last spring - support from the Arab League and the Security Council - is present now in Syria. The United States is thus pushing neighboring Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab League to lead. That group may soon call for safe havens to protect threatened civilians and seek to unite the opposition to Assad.

The United States will not commit American troops but must help to create the safe havens with economic, political, and logistical support. But arming the growing rebel forces would be too risky as we don't know their leaders well enough and are troubled by reports that Al Qaeda affiliates are active in the fight against Assad. There are no good answers here and no assurance a successor government would be any more responsible. Helping the Syrian people resist their brutal government will be much trickier than supporting the Libyan rebels. But, seeing Assad fall from power seems the best way to stop the suffering and to reduce his ally Iran's influence in the region.

It is a new day in the Middle East and a time of real testing for American policy. Our vast military strength will do us little good in this revolutionary Arab moment. We must rely on our diplomatic dexterity to maintain American influence and purpose in this vital region. Some critics call for a more aggressive US role, even as the head of an armed intervention force in Syria. But it is not smart to try to lead the parade, as we almost always did in the past. Instead of rushing forward into the fray, the administration is right to proceed carefully, patiently, and at the side of our Arab friends and Turkey as we seek to preserve American interests in this greatest test yet of President Obama's Middle East diplomacy.

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