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**Stop nuzzling new autocrats in Turkey and Egypt; start pushing freedom and democracy**  
**By LAWRENCE J. HAAS**

WASHINGTON – The next president must discard two longstanding but problematic pillars of U.S. policy in the Middle East and chart a new course that reflects both regional realities and the dynamic changes that are underway there.

For decades, presidents have sought to maintain regional stability by propping up pro-Western autocrats and to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the first step toward addressing broader regional issues.

To maintain stability, Washington backed the autocrats who kept the oil flowing to the West and held anti-American forces within their societies in check. But, the autocrats provided little freedom or opportunity to the millions over whom they ruled, nourishing the mass frustration that exploded in the Arab Spring - a watershed event whose ultimate outcome won't be known for years.

Nevertheless, Washington increasingly seems to be resorting to old patterns, strengthening its ties to a new generation of autocrats and offering few public protests when they restrict the rights of their people.

President Obama has built warm relations with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, who is jailing journalists and opposition figures on trumped-up charges. He's also boosting foreign aid to the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, who is threatening to end the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, letting terrorists roam free across an increasingly lawless Sinai Desert, and allowing attacks on Egypt's Christian Copts to continue.

U.S. nuzzling with the newest autocrats, however, will weaken U.S. influence in the region over the long term by reinforcing grass-root suspicions among Arab populations that Washington does not support their quest for more freedom and opportunity.

A return to the Israeli-Palestinian fixation also would weaken America's regional influence. Presidents have traditionally focused first on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, falling for the vacuous proposition from our foreign policy establishment that it holds the key to broader regional progress.

In this view, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict engenders broad regional sympathy for Palestinians, prevents Arab states from peace-making with Israel, and motivates jihadists and - by solving that conflict, Washington can address broader Arab-Israeli peace, Iranian and Syrian sponsorship of terrorism, and Iran's pursuit of nuclear weaponry.

In fact, the key to regional progress runs not through the Palestinian territories, but through Tehran.

Iran is challenging the United States for regional hegemony, working to de-stabilize some of its neighbors, sponsoring the terrorists that can undermine any serious Israeli-Palestinian peace effort and seeking the nuclear weapons that would boost its influence and trigger a regional arms race.

The new U.S. president must pursue a new long-term approach that puts Washington on the side of democratic forces and views the region with clear eyes.

For starters, he should speak out consistently for freedom and democracy, help build the infrastructure of long-term democracy - such as opposition parties, civil society, and an independent media - and tie U.S. foreign aid more closely to a regime's human rights record.

The region will remain messy for years to come but, over the long term, a freer and more democratic Middle East would make both the United States and the world more secure and prosperous.

Moreover, the president should spend less time pursuing Israeli-Palestinian peace - which will arrive when both societies want it, not when Washington coaxes their leaders into a deal - and more time pressuring Tehran over its nuclear program and regional mischief.

For Iran, he also should support the internal forces that seek to replace the regime with a more democratic government, which would likely end Tehran's terror sponsorship, probably reduce its regional mischief, and might re-think its nuclear course.

Whether it's the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Arab-Israeli peace, state-sponsored terrorism, or nuclear weaponry, the new president will more likely make progress over the long term by nurturing freedom and democracy than by cozying up to autocrats and accepting misguided notions about what drives the region.

#### ABOUT THE WRITER

Lawrence J. Haas is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. Readers may write to him at AFPC, 509 C Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20002.

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