

Comment

Mistakes of Iran repeated in Egypt

Egyptians, like Canadians, will put up with just about anything. But the violent riots that convulsed parts of Cairo two weeks ago showed that "just about" had finally been reached.

The Mideast's most important nation is deep in a grave economic crisis accelerated by the sharp drop in world oil prices and a decline in tourism and remittances from Egyptian workers abroad. Today, Egypt's 49 million people cannot feed themselves: 60% of all food must be imported, most of it on credit.

Rising prices, 20% inflation and mounting unemployment were certainly behind the recent riots. There was also another and far more important impetus: Passionate bitterness among patriotic Egyptians that their nation's independence has been sold to the U.S.

It was the late Anwar Sadat — adored by western media but despised at home — who made Egypt utterly dependent on the U.S. President Jimmy Carter bought Egypt's agreement to Camp David and peace with Israel by \$2.5 billion U.S. in military and economic aid each year — just enough to keep the army and people fairly quiet, but not enough to build Egypt into a power able to challenge Israel. American money poured into Egypt, creating a new class of dealers and fixers — and enriching Sadat and his corrupt entourage.

When Sadat was assassinated, Egyptians danced with joy. Only the West, blinded by its self-created delusions about the Mideast, reacted with shock and sorrow. "Where are the crowds of mourners?" asked a befuddled Walter Cronkite. Sadat's legacy was to leave Egypt hopelessly addicted to U.S. arms, food and hard cash. And to make Egypt an outcast in the Mideast.



ERIC MARGOLIS

Gen. Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Sadat, is honest, competent and rather colorless. Egyptians who regard Sadat as a traitor, thief and buffoon respect Mubarak and his efforts to hold Egypt together. But Mubarak has been fatally tainted by his dependence on Washington. It is hardly a secret that the Egyptian military and government is riddled with American agents, that little happens in Cairo without Washington's prior agreement.

Mubarak's fate may have been sealed last fall when he was publicly humiliated by the U.S. when it forced down an Egyptian aircraft carrying the *Achille Lauro* pirates. Not only was Mubarak left looking foolish, but it was revealed that U.S. intelligence services had openly bugged senior Egyptian officials.

Worse, from the Egyptian view, the nation has actually fallen under a fair amount of Israeli influence. The U.S. aid upon which Egypt depends is doled out by Congress. The potent pro-Israel lobby in Congress holds a virtual veto power over such aid.

Egypt is thus forced by Congress to generally cooperate with Israel and to adhere to the Camp David

Accords which are detested by a majority of Egyptians. Mubarak is caught in an impossible dilemma: If he asserts independence from Washington aid will be cut, his army may revolt and his people starve. He could turn to the Soviets but they are detested in Egypt and, besides, Moscow could not provide Egypt with either food or cash.

Inside Egypt, largely unseen by foreign observers, pressure is mounting. What the western media mistakenly calls Islamic fundamentalism is really old-fashioned nationalism in the world's oldest nation. Unless Mubarak can find a way of lessening American influence in Egypt and reasserting his nation's independence and legitimate role in the Arab world, an explosion along the Nile will surely be coming.

The rioters two weeks ago took pains to burn down nightclubs and luxury hotels, a sure sign of mounting anger against western cultural influence and what Muslims regard as immorality. On top of Egypt is a veneer of western-looking and sounding Egyptians, many enriched by U.S. aid. Beneath, the vast sea of impoverished Egyptians making less than \$200 a year. This silent majority views Egypt's relations with the U.S. and Israel as treason and blasphemy. Two weeks ago they spoke.

It seems merely a matter of time before mobs bring down the government or before a new, young Col. Gamal Abdel-Nasser emerges in a military coup. The U.S. is making precisely the same mistakes in Cairo that it made in Iran, but no one in Washington wants — or dares — to speak out.