

Comments by the Secretary on Egypt

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Interview

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Secretary of State

Washington, DC

January 29, 2013

QUESTION: And there's news today about Egypt. And I'm curious, with all the chaos that's breaking out there, your thoughts on what's going to happen, what should we do, if anything, and what does it mean for the region?

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, those are three really important questions. And I think that post the Arab revolutions that took place in Egypt and Libya and Tunisia and bursts of them elsewhere in the region, there was always going to be a period of adjustment. And what we have to work for, along with the international community, as well as people inside Egypt, is not to see these revolutions hijacked by extremists, not to see the return of dictatorial rule, the absence of the rule of law. And it's hard. It's hard going from decades under one-party or one-man rule, as somebody said, waking up from a political coma and understanding democracy. So we have a lot at stake in trying to keep moving these transformations in the right direction.

QUESTION: Is President Morsi, though, is he sort of with the program with us, or not? Because he said some horrible things about Israelis two years ago, and there's some things printed today from one of his senior aides about – that the Holocaust didn't exist. And so there's very sort of suspicious things that he's saying, and with all the turmoil, I'm wondering if he – is he with us or against us?

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, we were quite concerned about those statements. And the Egyptian Presidency repudiated them and reaffirmed a commitment to the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, which is, of course, absolutely core to everything that we hope to see happen in the Middle East.

But you have to, I think, take a step back and look at the fact that the people now in power in these countries have never been in government, never had a chance to really learn how to run agencies or to make decisions. So we don't certainly condone or in any way approve of what a lot of these leaders are doing or failing to do, but we also know how important it is that we try to avoid even more extreme elements which are active across the region, taking control of territory, even threatening a regime, where the people are often American-educated, have some ongoing commitment to make tough decisions. When I negotiated the ceasefire in Gaza with President Morsi, he was very involved. I'd obviously gone to Israel first, then I went to Egypt and we got it done. It's still holding.

So we have to keep pushing forward and yet call it like we see it when we think something is not appropriate, as we did with those statements.

QUESTION: When you met him, did you have a sense that he was a good partner or someone that we could deal with, or do we have to sort of be very cautious with him?

SECRETARY CLINTON: I think he has a lot of the right intentions. Certainly in my long conversations with him, the many reports of meetings that I've received of other American officials, a recent congressional delegation, you do get the impression that he and the team around him are trying to deal with the economy that is in very bad shape in Egypt, the loss of foreign currency and investment and the tourism trade, the political reforms that are necessary.

But the jury's out, Greta. I've been around long enough, so it's not what somebody says; it's what they do. And some of what he's done we have approved of and supported; and some of what he's done, like abrogating a lot of power unto himself personally, reinstating emergency law provisions that had been a hallmark of the Mubarak regime, are very troubling. And we have a balancing act to do, as do the Egyptian people, as to how this is going to turn out.

QUESTION: Now, I'm very suspicious of him because he had – he invited President Bashir of Sudan and essentially gave him a state visit to Egypt a couple of months ago when he should've been, at least in my view – he's under indictment of the International Criminal Court; he should've been arrested. So I mean, anyone who's sort of lending a hand to President Bashir and not arresting him made me suspicious of him, in light of the fact that Iran is up to their eyeballs with Sudan.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, unfortunately, that's not an uncommon story across the African continent. And we have reached out numerous times to countries that have given Bashir a welcome, allowed him to come to meetings, because he is under indictment and he does need to be held accountable for what happened on his watch as president.

On the other hand, though, this is a long border with Egypt. One of the biggest problems that Egypt is facing is a lack of border security – the importation of weapons on their way to Gaza, for example, coming out of Sudan.

So we have a lot of very intense discussions with our Egyptian counterparts, including him, as to, let's prioritize. We need to stop extremism in Egypt. We need to stop weapons coming across your border. We need to reassert order in the Sinai. It's in Egypt's interest, it's in Israel's interest. We need to try to stop Hamas from its constant attacks on Israel, something that also redounds to the detriment of Egypt over the long run because it could become uncontrollable. We have a long list of important issues that we're raising with them, and obviously their borders with Libya and Sudan are critical.