

Comments now will define ties later: Experts

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"By making two out of four conditions related to Israel, it might be seen that we don't care about what's going on in Egypt," said Rex Brynen, an expert on Middle East politics at McGill University. "It might be read that what's going on on the ground in Egypt is secondary to other issues. That is the kind of statement that might come back to bite us."

People have been flooding the streets of many Egyptian cities asking for Hosni Mubarak to leave the top job he has been holding for 30 years. The demonstrations followed those in Tunisia, which led to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January. Similar protests also took place in Jordan and Yemen.

Mr. Brynen said he agrees with Mr. Cannon that the upholding of already-existing treaties is very important, but making that a pre-condition to an "as of yet non-existent government" is bizarre. Any new Egyptian government would automatically be part of any international treaties previous governments had signed, unless it would actively choose to undo them, Mr. Brynen said.

Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979, marking the mutual recognition of each other's states and the end of war between the two countries, as well as the Israeli military withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Western nations, as well as regional Arab players, see the peace Egypt-Israel peace treaty as a very valuable tool in the Middle East Peace process.

During a Feb. 2 press briefing at the White House, a reporter asked Philip J. Crowley, assistant secretary of state, whether the US would make its relations with Egypt contingent on the country's compliance with the peace treaty.

"[The peace treaty] is of tremendous value to both of those countries and to the region," Mr. Crowley replied. "And we would hope that that would continue to be respected, just as it has been for more than three decades."

While the position of the US is far less conditional in tone, Mr. Cannon's stated conditions for Canada's support for Egypt reflect this government's speculations about potential political outcomes in the country, said Bessma Momani, senior fellow at the Waterloo-based Centre for International Governance Innovation who researched the economic liberalization of the Middle East.

"It's too premature to speculate what would be the foreign policy of Egypt, we should be focusing on core values," Ms. Momani said. "Down the road, Canada can use its influence to promote the regional stability we seek, but to put this as a pre-condition early on, before any government is in power, is very limited in perspective."

Melissa Lantsman, Mr. Cannon's spokesperson, said Canada commends Egypt's contribution to peace and stability in the Middle East, but also repeated Mr. Cannon's earlier statements that Canada would not support an Egyptian government that withdrew its recognition for Israel or from the peace treaty.

"Such moves would have a negative impact on regional peace and security, which would adversely impact the security of Canadians

and the world economy," Ms. Lantsman wrote in an email. "In the interest of transparency, we think it is important to set out Canada's position before a future government is formed."

"We support an orderly transition guided by values such as non-violence, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of religious minorities," she continued. "Ultimately, it is up to the Egyptian people to decide who will govern them"

But although Canadian government officials also speak about respect for democracy and human rights, the pre-conditions regarding Israel might affect Canada's international reputation, said Paul Sedra, an expert on the history of Egypt at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

"Canada's position seems to be conditional on what the results of democracy in Egypt would bring," he said. "We're losing the credibility we once had in this region, because protestors on the ground are keeping track of what various governments are saying."

The Israel pre-condition is not surprising, but is in fact a self-interested one driven by domestic political interests, said David Carment, fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and professor at Carleton University's Normal Paterson School of International Affairs.

Conditional foreign policy is based on incentives, but Canada does not hold such influence, he said.

"That is merely a set of statements that is purely meant to satisfy domestic consumption," Mr. Carment said. "What leverage does Canada have to impose that outcome on Egypt?"

Mr. Sedra said Canada's overall response to the crisis in Egypt has been more reserved than that of the US, United Kingdom or the EU has a whole. These Western allies have called for the political transition in Egypt to start now, whereas Canada has only encouraged a general, peaceful transition.

Although the Canadian position may have overall little relevance now in determining the outcome in Egypt, our statements may hold value later, once the new Egyptian government will review the country's foreign policy, including bilateral relationships, said Mr. Brynen.

Mr. Sedra echoed those thoughts, saying that Canada's current position on the Egyptian crisis will shape this country's relationship with the Arab world.

"Democracy movements elsewhere in the region are going to be looking at what Canada has to say," he said, "whether Canada stands by its principles, or whether we are going to choose strategic reasons."

Although Canada has trade links with countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan, and although they are not negligible, experts say concerns over their future are small "in the grand scheme of things," where regional stability takes prominence.

Growing instability in the region will undoubtedly affect Canada as well, Mr. Carment said. But although Canada speaks of support for democracy, he said the Harper government "has all but abandoned democracy promotion."

"It's hypocritical, you get what you paid for," he said.



Then-Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert greets Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon in 2009.



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