The Obama Administration’s challenges in responding to the Arab Spring fall into two categories. The first is developing an actual region-wide strategy for these unprecedented upheavals. The Administration’s responses to the convulsions thus far can charitably be described as ad hoc and reactive. It is one thing to acknowledge and act on the obvious fact that the particular circumstances in each country are different, as are US interests. It is another thing to completely fail – some four months now into this revolutionary season – to have developed any manner of coherent strategic framework that helps determine and guide US actions (or inactions, as the case may be) in any specific circumstance.

This brings up the second type of challenge facing the US. That is identifying the most salient issues and tactics in each particular country that, even if far from the headlines, will do much in the coming months to determine the success or failure of consolidating the democratic transformation. These are the long term bread-and-butter issues such as institution building, restoring civil society, preventing the rise of extremist elements, cultivating rule of law, and strengthening political parties and electoral practices. It is on the question of these particular issues, and the US policy response, that the long-term fate of each country’s Arab Spring will rest.

In Egypt one of these foremost issues is religious freedom. As I have written previously over at the Fikra Forum, “How a country treats its religious minorities reveals how free it truly is. Egypt’s Coptic Christians, in particular, showed considerable patriotism, support for national unity, and commitment to reform in the recent protests and revolution. Yet, recent violence against some Coptic communities shows how fragile their place in the new Egypt remains.”

Erstwhile Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak played a cynical game of repressing Egyptian Islamists even as he also supported the repression of secular and pluralist democratic opposition voices and – crucially – Egypt’s Christian minorities. Egyptian converts from Islam to Christianity, though very few in number, suffered particularly heinous treatment – including imprisonment and sadistic torture – at the hands of Mubarak’s hated security forces.

As precarious as the Copt situation may be, religious freedom in Egypt means much more than just the conditions facing its religious minorities. Religious freedom in Egypt is also essential for Egypt’s majority Muslim population to realize the possibility of democratic flourishing – especially those Egyptian Muslims who embrace tolerance and reject religiously-inspired violence and violation of minority rights.

The most contested and therefore determinative religious freedom legal and policy issues have long been evident in Egypt, yet now acquire a new salience. These include the equal treatment of all Egyptians irrespective of religious confession – and thus the abolition of laws and regulations such as the Hamayouni ordinances on church buildings that single out the Christian community. Even more important, in both symbol and substance, will be ending the policy of listing a citizen’s religion on national identity cards. This practice may appear to be benign but in fact has been used to foment religious discrimination and to disenfranchise any citizen who seeks to exercise their internationally-recognized right to change their religion.
What should the US be doing? President Obama articulated the broad principle in his Cairo speech of 2009 when he identified religious freedom as one of the core issues in the relationship between the United States and Muslim-majority countries: “People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul. This tolerance is essential for religion to thrive, but it's being challenged in many different ways. Among some Muslims, there's a disturbing tendency to measure one's own faith by the rejection of somebody else's faith. The richness of religious diversity must be upheld -- whether it is for Maronites in Lebanon or the Copts in Egypt…Freedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together.”

As inspiring as these principles were when President Obama first articulated them two years ago, they are even more urgently needed in Egypt now. Yet regrettably this White House has shown little capacity or political will to follow through on religious freedom promotion, in Egypt or elsewhere. To take the most vivid example, over two years into the Administration, the position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom has only just this month been filled.

One position does not a policy make, however. Religious freedom promotion in a strategic country like Egypt can and should be done by a full range of US officials, from low level political officers to Ambassador Margaret Scobey and up to Secretary Clinton and diplomat-in-chief President Obama. To begin this means that all US officials should make clear in their private and public statements to Egyptian officials that religious freedom protections will be a sine qua non for a truly democratic Egypt. What of Islamist parties? Given the multiple Salafist groups and the persistent ambiguities in the Muslim Brotherhood’s positions and goals, the US should focus on consistent principles rather than singling out any particular group for inclusion or exclusion in the political process. Specifically this will mean working with Egyptian legal, political, and religious leaders to affirm that all individuals and parties are welcome in the political process if they agree to abide by democratic principles such as respect for minority rights, pluralism and tolerance, and Egypt’s obligations under international human rights agreements. The US should be significantly increasing its funding to Egyptian civil society groups and political parties who support religious freedom, and can help plant its seeds in the fertile but fragile new soil of Egyptian democracy. Nor should this only be a US effort. In NATO leaders such as British Prime Minister David Cameron (the first Western head of government to visit Egypt after Mubarak’s ouster) and French President Nicholas Sarkozy, just to name two, could readily add their voices to those in support of religious freedom, and their government’s resources as well.

In the coming years when we look back on Egypt in 2011, the fate of religious freedom will very likely be seen as having determined much of the country’s subsequent course, for good or for ill.