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Middle East Brief

“Resetting” U.S.-Egypt Relations

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In the four decades since President Anwar Sadat ended Egypt’s two decades of close relations with the Soviet Union and reconciled with the United States—a period inaugurated by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s successful mediation of the 1974 Egypt-Israel Disengagement Agreement—U.S.-Egypt relations have never seen a more negative trajectory than that experienced during the past eight months. News on March 24th that a court in Egypt has sentenced 529 members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death has further exacerbated the crisis.

At the root of this downturn is the huge gap between the two sides’ narratives regarding the implications of Egypt’s experience in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening and their very different definitions of the situation in Cairo on the eve of the overthrow of President Mohamad Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood regime on June 30, 2013—as well as their differing perceptions of the developments that followed. To make matters worse, Washington and Cairo seem unable to demonstrate sufficient sensitivity to each other’s priorities and concerns. The U.S. does not seem to appreciate the extent to which the Egyptian civic nationalists (*madaniyya*)¹ regard their struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential one; on their side, the Egyptian government seems oblivious to what Washington regards as clear signs of Cairo’s return to authoritarianism.

Increasingly, the reaction of U.S. public opinion and decision makers to this downturn in Egypt-U.S relations has been a mixture of despair and abandonment. Thus, many in D.C.—in the administration, Congress, and the media—seem to have “given up” on Egypt.

This Brief explores the growing rift between Washington and Cairo, rooted as it is in the very different manner in which the two countries have come to view recent events in Egypt and their consequently competing narratives about these developments. It will then take stock of Egypt's long-standing significance to U.S. national interests and explain why, as the Middle East experiences tectonic changes, ignoring or abandoning Egypt can be done only at great peril.

Defining the Moment

Reacting to the removal of Egypt's President Mohamad Morsi, U.S. President Barak Obama ordered a review of U.S. relations with Egypt. On August 15, following the killing of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood protestors in Rabaa and Nahda Squares in Cairo, the President announced the cancellation of the annual "Bright Star" U.S.-Egyptian joint military exercise.² By October, the policy review had resulted in an administration decision to suspend the delivery to Egypt of Apache helicopters, Harpoon missiles, and tank parts. Also halted were a \$260 million cash transfer and a \$300 million loan guarantee.³ These measures were explained as constituting a middle ground between the administration's desire to rebuke Egypt's new rulers for what the *Los Angeles Times* described as their "ever-expanding crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood movement" and the administration's need to maintain what President Obama has called "a constructive relationship" with a historically crucial Arab ally.⁴

In diplomatic parlance, Egypt's reaction to Washington's decision was quite sharp. Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy, who previously served as his country's ambassador to the U.S., told *Al-Ahram* that relations between the United States and Egypt were in turmoil and that the entire Middle East could suffer. "We are now in a delicate state reflecting the turmoil in the relationship," he remarked, "and anyone who says otherwise is not speaking honestly."⁵

An important dimension of the current downturn in U.S.-Egyptian relations is the enormous gap in the manner in which each side defines the events that took place in Egypt between June 30 and July 3, 2013. The U.S. saw these events as amounting to a "military coup"—the culmination of a grand power struggle between two robust political forces: the Egyptian military and the Muslim Brotherhood. This phase of the struggle was seen as having ended with the military overthrow of an elected president, thus depriving Egypt of the opportunity to experience the full meaning of a democratic evolution beginning with the removal of Hosni Mubarak. In essence, the old regime was seen as having returned to the helm, with Egypt's military once again reigning over the country.

Egypt's civic nationalists, on the other hand, defined the same events in a radically different manner. In their eyes, the developments of June–July 2013 constituted a full-fledged revolution, just as intense and comprehensive as the first revolution that ended with the removal of the Mubarak regime in January 2011. The *tamarrud* movement mobilized millions of Egyptians who demanded early presidential elections. That movement—supported by a broad front that included the military, the security services, the National Salvation Front led by Mohamed ElBaradei, civil society organizations, al-Azhar University, the Coptic Orthodox Church, and the al-Nour Islamic Party—was now adopting a road map for a new political process.⁶

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Moreover, in the eyes of Egypt's civic nationalists, these events constituted an existential turning point in the country's history, one that would determine which of two directions it would take: to eventually become a democratic, civic, and modern state, or to become a theocratic state led by what they saw as the secret society that was the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, whereas the U.S. saw these developments as a power struggle, Egypt's civic nationalists saw the struggle as having little to do with power and everything to do with their country's most basic identity, as a civic or religious polity. For them, the question was similar to that which Plato took up in *The Laws*: Who should be the source of law: God or Man?

Competing Narratives

The Obama administration views itself as having made a huge investment in the Egyptian "Awakening." By urging President Mubarak to heed the demand of the masses gathered in Tahrir Square two and a half years ago, the administration set aside three decades of strategic partnership with a dependable ally. Despite signs that the Muslim Brotherhood was better positioned to take advantage of the new situation than any other political force in Egypt, the administration had advocated an electoral process that saw the Brothers winning elections to the legislature as well as to the presidency. So the U.S. regarded Morsi as having entered the presidential palace legitimately—as having won his position through free and fair elections.

Obama administration officials were not blind to the fact that in the aftermath of these elections, the Brothers' performance in office was highly deficient, and that as president, Morsi made many mistakes. Still, the U.S. insisted that as Egypt's first democratically elected president, Morsi should have been given the chance, as in any democracy, to defend, and be judged on, his performance in office whenever the next elections were to take place.

Given these inclinations, it is hardly surprising that the Obama administration regarded Morsi's removal on June 30 as a "coup," if not a "counter-revolution." The millions demanding Morsi's removal were not equated with the millions who gathered in Tahrir Square in late January 2011 demanding Mubarak's ouster: The two mass demonstrations were seen as very different, because whereas Mubarak could not be removed from office through elections, the revolution had established a mechanism for punishing incompetent leaders at the polls.

Not surprisingly, the narrative of Egypt's civic nationalists about these same developments is very different. In their view, Washington has falsely equated democracy with elections, ignoring the fact that what Egypt experienced in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution was anything but pluralist democracy. Instead, as they see it, what emerged was a crude form of majoritarian rule, wherein minorities were disenfranchised and minority views ignored. The former was demonstrated in the extreme misfortunes experienced by Egypt's Copts in the aftermath of the Brotherhood's victory; the latter was reflected in the formulation of the 2012 constitution.

In the eyes of Egypt's civic nationalists, Washington's interpretation of the Brotherhood's conduct was naive, if not foolish. In their view, the Muslim Brothers are Leninists, not democrats, and the Brotherhood remained a secret organization, with no public records of its members, organization, or finances even after they came to power—and "democracy without democrats," the civic nationalists insisted, simply cannot exist. Instead of ruling democratically, the Brothers were seen as engaging in a power grab: launching a process of systematic penetration of the government and of the institutional organs of the state; issuing a presidential decree that immunized the presidency from checks by all other branches, including the judiciary;⁷ and using the 2012 constitution to rapidly move Egypt toward becoming an Iranian-style theocratic state.

One example of the Brotherhood government's lack of real democracy, according to the civic nationalists, was the two election laws passed by the Brothers-dominated Shura Council—laws that were subsequently rejected by Egypt's High Constitutional Court as being unconstitutionally biased.⁸ In the absence of mechanisms to check this power grab and in light of the rapidly deteriorating situation, the civic nationalists saw no choice but to oust the Brothers by revolutionary force, before the damage they had inflicted would become irreversible.

Since President Morsi's removal on June 30, 2013, the civic nationalists' narrative about the Muslim Brotherhood has become even more derogatory, as the Brotherhood is now seen as having encouraged and aided the activity of groups supporting terrorism—thereby becoming terrorists themselves. Thus, during their one year in power, the Brothers were said to have allowed the return to Egypt of three thousand battle-tested Al-Qaeda terrorists and to have released by presidential orders a large number of condemned terrorists from Egyptian prisons. The Brothers are thereby viewed not only as responsible for the sharp rise in violence in Egypt's major cities, but also as having encouraged the creation of terror cells in the Sinai Peninsula and its consequent transformation into ungovernable land.

At the same time, the measures taken by Egypt's new government commensurate with its evaluation of the role and disposition of the Brotherhood are seen by the Obama administration and key members of Washington's policy and opinion-making circles as constituting nothing short of a return to the authoritarianism experienced during the three decades of Mubarak's rule. Two such opinion-makers described what they called the Egyptian military's "political project" as amounting to "a bruising cascade of actions, laws and decrees that violate basic rights and freedoms, constrain political space and sharpen polarization."⁹ Egypt's new constitution, approved in January 2014, is described by the same writers as providing "extensive autonomy and immunity to the army, as well as the right to try civilians in military courts."¹⁰ Once again, the Muslim Brothers are seen as being mass-arrested at best and as slaughtered at worse, and secular-liberal critics of the government are viewed as being rounded up and put on trial on trumped-up charges.

Not only is the gap between these narratives huge, but the two sides seem insensitive to the other's narratives, priorities, and concerns. For its part, the Obama administration seems not to appreciate the extent to which Egypt's civic nationalists saw the challenge presented by the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential one, striking at the very nature of the Egyptian state and the Egyptian future. Had the Obama administration appreciated this, they would have understood why Egyptians viewed its reaction to the June 30 military takeover and to the killings in mid-August as taking no account of the threat to which these were responses. Since under such circumstances there was little chance that the U.S. reaction would affect the behavior of Cairo's new leaders, it merely contributed to the further erosion of U.S. credibility and standing in the region.

Likewise, Egypt's new government seems insensitive to the "freedom agenda" component of U.S. foreign policy. In particular, Cairo seems not to appreciate the extent to which the Obama administration saw itself as invested in the "Arab Spring."¹¹ As a result, Egypt's rulers appear not to understand the administration's reaction to the harsh measures they are now taking to silence internal criticism and suppress protests. They fail to see that just as U.S. government reactions to the silencing of the Muslim Brothers range from disapproval (of President Morsi's removal and detention) to horror (at the killing of hundreds of protestors in Rabaa and Nahda Squares in Cairo on August 14, 2013), U.S. opinion leaders and decision makers simply cannot accept the jailing of those who in early 2011 were among the civic-liberal leaders and symbols of Tahrir Square. As these leaders do not seem to pose a threat to Egypt's heart and soul, the military

government's reaction to their criticism and their protests appears disproportionate at best.

Forget Egypt?

Given the huge gap between the narratives of the Obama administration and Egypt's current government regarding the developments in Egypt since the beginning of the Arab Awakening, and in view of the repeated manifestations of insensitivity on both sides vis-à-vis the other's priorities and concerns, there is a growing propensity in Washington to shrug Egypt off, and to view the deep crisis in the two countries' relations as insoluble but tolerable. The latter contention is based on the mistaken assessment that while Egypt is mired in domestic struggle, its role in the region is marginal. Under such circumstances, it is asserted that Egypt does not matter, and that repairing U.S.-Egyptian relations, though desirable, is not urgent.¹²

The growing perception that Egypt doesn't matter is, we believe, both short-sighted and ahistorical. First of all, with a population of 92 million, Egypt is the largest and most populous of the Arab states—and, having existed for millennia before the borders of other Middle East states were artificially carved out by Britain and France in the aftermath of the First World War, it is among the region's very few "real nations." Located on the shores of the Mediterranean and at the corner of Asia, Africa, and the Maghreb, its geopolitical position is also pivotal. Given such history and standing, it is not surprising that during much of the twentieth century, Egypt was the Arab world's trendsetter, culturally as much as politically.

Egypt has also established itself as an anchor of any Arab coalition intending to contain regional threats. In 1980–88, it was critical to organizing Arab backing for Iraq's war effort—a war that was seen as an effort to contain Iran's ambitions to export its revolution. Similarly, in early 1991, Egypt was an essential Arab component of the U.S.-orchestrated coalition that rolled back Saddam Hussein's conquest of Kuwait.

Moreover, Egypt has been a key moderating factor in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Not only did it chart the course by being the first Arab country to conclude a peace treaty with Israel, but it has sustained this treaty for the past thirty-five years despite recurring regional pressures, ranging from Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon to two Palestinian intifadas. In 1991, Egypt assisted the U.S. in organizing and hosting the Madrid Peace Conference, and in the aftermath of the 1993 PLO-Israel Oslo Accords, it hosted almost all post-Oslo implementation negotiations.

During the past two and a half decades, both before and after the horrific September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Egypt has been an active and effective partner in U.S. efforts to battle Islamic extremism and terror. From intelligence sharing to cooperation in covert operations, Egypt's security services have worked closely with their U.S. counterparts.

In the coming months and years, the relative importance of these Egyptian roles will only grow. To begin with, given the magnitude of the chaos currently characterizing the Middle East—posing as it does serious questions regarding the future viability of the region's nation-states—Egypt's participation in any attempt to restore order to the region will be essential. This is because any such restoration of order will require nothing less than Egypt's cooperating with Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states to create a "Concert of Arabia"—similar to the Concert of Europe created by Metternich to organize the continent into nation-states that would respect one another's territory and rights.

Second, regardless of how the nuclear negotiations with Iran conducted by the P5+1 turn out, containing Iran's influence—in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain—will be a major challenge. Recognition of Cairo's critically important role in such containment has already propelled a \$12 billion assistance package provided by the GCC to Egypt's post-June 30 government—now to be supplemented by an additional package, which is to include \$4.9 billion from the UAE.

Third, Egypt is critically important to providing the requisite regional backing to Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to achieve a breakthrough in Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking. Without Egypt's backing, the odds that PA President Mahmoud Abbas will feel secure enough to make the required Palestinian concessions for a breakthrough to materialize are next to zero. Similarly, without Egypt's close cooperation with Saudi Arabia, it will be impossible to translate the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative into an operational plan that could provide Israel with enough incentives to make the concessions required to meet the Palestinians' minimal aspirations. And without Egypt's continued effective containment of Hamas in Gaza, it would be impossible to prevent the latter from acting as an effective spoiler of any PA-Israeli accord, whether interim or permanent.

Fourth, without Egypt's continuing close security cooperation with Israel, it will be impossible to prevent al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and cells from transforming the Sinai Peninsula into a nest of and launching ground for Islamic extremism throughout the region. With

access to stockpiles of Libyan weapons, terrorism will be exported to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC countries; international trade passing through the Suez Canal will be targeted, as will the facilities for the region's oil and natural gas production. Thus, from the perspective of America's continuous war on terror, whether defined as such or not, Washington simply cannot afford to "give up" on Egypt—it is "too big to fail."

Finally, as a moderate Sunni Muslim country, Egypt may play a key role in the restoration and reintegration of Syria if the horrific bloodbath raging there were ever to end, perhaps through some equivalent of the 1989 Taif Accords that ended the fifteen-year Lebanese civil war.

Concluding Observations

U.S.-Egypt relations are currently experiencing a negative trajectory. Yet as the preceding analysis makes clear, Egypt is too important to ignore. A major effort should therefore be launched, involving addressing all dimensions of the crisis, to "reset" the two countries' relations. Discussions should take place aimed at narrowing the wide gap between the two sides' competing narratives about developments in Egypt since the eruption of the Arab Awakening, including their very different understandings of the current situation in Egypt. Candid conversations between the two countries' top leaders are necessary if they are to be more sensitive to their respective priorities and concerns. If a narrower gap in narratives can be achieved, along with greater understanding of each other's concerns, both sides might refrain from actions—such as restricting certain forms of aid on the U.S. side and jailing secular liberal critics and protesters on the Egyptian side—that poison U.S.-Egyptian relations. Indeed, such a degree of engagement would give the U.S. opportunities to incentivize the Egyptian military to allow Egyptian youth and liberal organizations a much greater role in politics, thus increasing their chances of one day becoming a third political force. The common interest of both sides in combating terrorism makes such engagement not only necessary but urgent.

Hopefully, such an improved environment might allow the U.S. to take a new course in its relations with Egypt. Instead of passing judgment on Egypt's performance, the U.S. might choose to engage in a constructive conversation with Cairo, and to assist it: 1) in restoring stability to the country; 2) in meeting the objectives of the "road map" it adopted toward a more democratic government; and 3) in helping transform Egypt into a civic, as opposed to theocratic, state. None of these goals will be reached easily, or without tension and conflict. But constructive

U.S.-Egyptian engagement—with each side respecting the other’s unique contributions to world history—could stop if not reverse the current negative trajectory, to the benefit of both sides.

Endnotes

- 1 Egyptian civic nationalists accept Islam as the religion of the state, as stipulated in all Egyptian constitutions since 1923, but insist that all laws be enacted by the peoples’ elected representatives in Parliament, and that disputes be adjudicated by the judiciary—that is, by civilian courts. Accordingly, they objected strongly to Article 4 of the constitution proposed by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012, providing that laws enacted would be subjected to review by al-Azhar University, which would be entrusted with verifying that they were consistent with Sharia law. They also objected to Article 219, which limited interpretation of Sharia law to a narrow school of Sunni thought, insisting instead that this task be left to the High Constitutional Court.
- 2 Dan Roberts, “Obama Condemns Egyptian Violence and Cancels Joint Military Drills,” *The Guardian*, August 15, 2013.
- 3 “Egypt Condemns US Decision to Suspend Military Aid,” *BBC*, October 10, 2013. Not suspended was U.S. assistance to Egypt’s counter-terrorism efforts, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula.
- 4 Shashank Bengali, “U.S. to Partially Suspend Military Aid to Egypt,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2013.
- 5 Maggie Fick, “Egypt-U.S. Relations in Turmoil: Egyptian Foreign Minister,” *Reuters*, October 16, 2013. A week earlier, a government spokesman in Cairo said that Washington’s decision to suspend assistance was wrong and that Egypt would “not surrender to American pressure.” See “Egypt Condemns US Decision to Suspend Military Aid,” *BBC*, October 10, 2013.
- 6 The road map declared by the General Command Of The Armed Forces on July 3, 2013, stipulated the following phases: “1) temporarily suspending the 2012 constitution; 2) swearing in Chief Justice of the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) Adli Mansour as interim president, granting him the right to issue constitutional declarations and take charge of a caretaker technocratic government until a new president is elected; 3) urging the expedited approval of an elections law by the SCC to prepare for upcoming House of Representatives elections; 4) forming a committee to amend the 2012 constitution; 5) drawing up a media code of ethics ‘that provides for the freedom of the media and ensures professional rules, credibility, impartiality and elevation of the higher interests of the State’; [and] 6) forming a higher commission for national reconciliation and empowering youth in government.” Mokhtar Awad, “Egypt’s New Road Map,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 12, 2013.* See also <https://www.facebook.com/Egy.Army.Spox/posts/335803989883923>.*
- 7 David D. Kirkpatrick and Mayy El-Sheikh, “Citing Deadlock, Egypt’s Leader Seizes New Power and Plans Mubarak Retrial,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2012.
- 8 The Shura Council took over the legislative powers of the Council of Representatives after the latter was dissolved by the High Constitutional Court.
- 9 Michele Dunne and Thomas Carothers, “Egypt’s Evolving Governance Is No ‘Democratic Transition,’” *Washington Post*, January 23, 2014.
- 10 Ibid. See also Roger Cohen, “The Egyptian Disaster,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2014. Cohen wrote: “This ‘restoration’ [of democracy] has in fact involved a fierce crackdown on the Brotherhood, named a terrorist organization on Dec. 25, and on anyone not bowing to Sisi, whose brutal new order has left well over 1,000 people dead. It has involved the rapid adoption of a Constitution drafted by a 50-member committee including only two representatives of Islamist parties, so providing a mirror image of the problems with Morsi’s Islamist-dominated drafting process. The Constitution won the approval this month of 98.1 percent of voters, a back-to-the-future number recalling Saddam Hussein’s ‘elections.’ In fact this was 98.1 percent of the mere 38.6 percent of Egyptians who voted: Most Egyptians are either cowed in fear (the Brotherhood) or despairing (the Twitter-generation youth who ignited the Tahrir revolution) or reduced to apathy: So much for inclusiveness.”
- 11 Not surprisingly, the administration’s reactions to the events in Egypt were couched in “freedom agenda” language. Thus, State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki noted that the suspension of U.S. assistance was “pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections.” (“Egypt Condemns US Decision to Suspend Military Aid,” *BBC*, October 10, 2013). Similarly, White House spokesman Jay Carney said: “We will continue to support a democratic transition and oppose violence as a means of resolving differences in Egypt.” (Bengali, “U.S. to Partially Suspend Military Aid to Egypt.”) “In the half-year since the Egyptian military ousted President Mohamad Morsi, U.S. officials from President Obama on down have repeatedly said that the United States seeks to advance ‘Egypt’s transition to democracy.’” (Dunne and Carothers, “Egypt’s Evolving Governance.”)
- 12 See Bobby Ghosh, “Viewpoint: Egypt No Longer Matters,” *Time*, August 18, 2013; Aaron David Miller, “Obama’s Egypt Policy Makes Perfect Sense,” *Foreign Policy*, August 19, 2013; Aaron David Miller, “America Has Nowhere to Go on Egypt,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2013.

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