PolicyWatch 1966

Israel and Egypt: Reports from a Changing Region

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On July 25, Washington Institute Ziegler distinguished fellow David Makovsky, who recently returned from a trip to Israel and Ramallah, was joined in a Policy Forum by Institute Next Generation fellow Eric Trager, who spent much of June and July conducting extensive research in Egypt. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

DAVID MAKOVSKY: ISRAEL AND IRAN

Download Makovsky's report on trends in Israeli public opinion.

Recent conversations with Israeli officials indicate that they see two sets of U.S. policies as (unintended) incentives to strike Iran. First, they view the structure of current international

diplomacy with Iran, in which Washington is a critical player, as fatally flawed. The P5+1 nuclear talks led by the United States, Britain, China, France, Russia, and Germany are premised on the idea that it is only a matter of time before Tehran gives in to ongoing pressure, and that the international community can afford to wait. The result is a weaker stance on confidence-building measures, such as asking Iran to remove only the most advanced level of enriched uranium instead of all such material.

Israel feels quite differently about the timing issue. Because it is not a global superpower, it sees its military capabilities as finite and believes its window for action is closing. Therefore, it views protracted negotiations with Iran as anathema. Israel wants negotiations that push Tehran to urgently ship out its stockpile of low-enriched (i.e., 3.5 percent) uranium, which if further refined would be enough for around four atomic bombs. Moreover, Israel views the allied powers' failure to admit that diplomacy is stuck as a sign that they are stalling to make sure Israel does not resort to a unilateral strike. Accordingly, Israeli leaders are beginning to feel isolated, as if they can only count on themselves when it comes to resolving the Iranian nuclear problem.

The second U.S. factor incentivizing an Israeli strike is a misreading of the country's internal debate on the issue. Although some in the Israeli political and military echelon are skeptical of the enthusiasm that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak have shown for a strike, their opposition is rooted in the belief that the United States can hit Iran more effectively than they can. No cabinet minister believes that a nuclear-armed Iran could be contained like the Soviet Union -- rather, some are banking on the hope that the United States will either attack or unveil far more crippling sanctions. According to this school of thought, a U.S.-led effort could allow for a multilateral coalition to continue sanctions post-attack, reducing the chances of Tehran importing the material needed to fully reconstitute their program. If Washington appears unwilling to pursue that course, Netanyahu and Barak will have a much easier time winning domestic support for their approach, since ministers will believe there is no alternative. In other words, U.S. caution on this front may wind up shifting the Israeli debate and bolstering the Netanyahu-Barak school.

Barring a change in U.S. behavior, the prospects of an Israeli strike will grow as the country's window for action closes. Israel fears putting itself in a position where it can no longer effectively hurt Iran's nuclear program, which would force it to depend on Washington to act in the indefinite future. What is needed is U.S.-Israeli dialogue on enlarging the latter's window for action, allowing the two countries to synchronize their approaches.

In addition to finite military capabilities, Israel's window will be shaped by two other factors. With the exception of the 2008-2009 Gaza war, when it felt compelled to respond to a barrage of rockets, Israel has largely avoided opening major military offensives beyond October due to weather uncertainty. The U.S. political situation is a factor as well -- the November election could result in either a second Obama term or a new Romney administration that may not have adequate staff until late spring 2013, and this layer of uncertainty makes a pre-November attack a fifty-fifty proposition.

Finally, the Israeli political echelon believes that if they do strike Iran, they will face rocket attacks from Hizballah in Lebanon or Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza alongside any Iranian retaliation.

ERIC TRAGER: WHERE DO THINGS STAND IN EGYPT?

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A key story in Egypt today is the low-flame power struggle between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and Muhammad Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government. The Egyptian military and the MB are natural enemies: the military controls Egypt's weapons and much of the economy, while the Brotherhood is Egypt's best-mobilized political force. Over the coming years, the power struggle between Morsi's Brotherhood and the SCAF will dominate Egyptian politics, and each side will try to test the other's red lines rather than engaging in violent conflict.

The MB holds firm control of the presidency. While Morsi's individual powers as president have not yet been explicitly defined, he will be able to advance the Brotherhood's agenda by appointing ministers. He will also use the presidency as a bully pulpit for influencing public opinion.

While the MB has said that the Morsi presidency and the MB-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) are separate entities, both coordinate with top MB leaders through the Brotherhood's weekly Shura Committee meetings. The 120-member committee includes all members of the MB Guidance Office, most top FJP leaders, many top FJP parliamentarians, and at least one of Morsi's presidential advisors. Key strategic and political matters are discussed and voted on during the committee meetings, and the results of these votes are binding on all Muslim Brothers. Thus, through this structure, the FJP and Morsi's presidential office remain beholden to, rather than separate from, the Brotherhood.

Together with the Brotherhood's far-reaching control over Egypt's political system, the MB's structure allows it to act on behalf of the FJP and Morsi. For example the Brotherhood can mobilize activists to support Morsi's "100-day plan" by directing traffic, providing security, picking up trash; likewise, it can fill Tahrir Square with protestors on behalf of the party or the president himself.

Given the prevalence of Brotherhood officials throughout the Egyptian government, as well as the ongoing power struggle between the MB and SCAF, the United States has little opportunity to influence Egyptian domestic politics. While there has been some discussion of conditioning military aid to Egypt on progress toward democratization, Egyptians do not see any linkage between military aid and domestic politics, and Egyptian political actors are therefore unlikely to respond to this kind of conditionality.

The United States should, however, condition American military aid on strategic interests. The Egyptian military's apparent unwillingness to address rising instability in the Sinai Peninsula -- and the likelihood that this instability could spark a major crisis between Egypt and Israel -- should be especially worrying to Washington. For this reason, Washington may consider using its military aid as leverage for compelling the Egyptian military to act more forcefully in the Sinai.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gabrielle Tudin.

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