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*"The Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Current,  
And Prospects for Post-Mubarak Egypt: An Early Assessment"*

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Madame Chairman,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss the Muslim Brotherhood and the direction of the Islamist current in Egyptian politics and society today. Having just returned from a fact-finding mission to Egypt several days ago, which included intensive discussions with the broad array of political actors in Egyptian society (including members of the Muslim Brotherhood), I am eager to share my observations with you on the potential role Islamists will play in the “new Egypt” and the implications of this development for U.S.-Egyptian relations and broader U.S. interests. With your permission, I will leave discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood inside the United States to my colleagues.

**Context:** Before turning to the specific question of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is important to provide a general comment about the situation in Egypt. I will summarize my view as follows: One cannot but be moved by the courage, enthusiasm and audacity of the people – largely young people – who toppled the Mubarak regime. I believe their commitment and determination will eventually be vindicated in the development of a more hopeful, more open, forward-looking Egypt. In other words, the long-term looks positive. However, for many reasons, the near term looks problematic. The best case will be bumpy, with the uncertain relationship between army and civilian forces moving in zigs-and-zags – indeed, often in bloody zigs-and-zags, as was the case over the past week. Even more likely will be worse-case situations that will be far more difficult, vexing and even dangerous for Egypt, U.S.-Egyptian relations and U.S. regional interests than what we have seen in ten weeks since the start of the revolutionary events in Tahrir Square. The challenge for the United States is to help Egypt weather a period of profound uncertainty; provide what assistance, counsel and partnership we can to support those in Egypt who wish to take a liberal, democratic, inclusive, responsible and peaceful course of political change; and insulate our broader regional interests from the potential negative impact of bad- and worse-case scenarios.

### **From Revolution to Transition**

It is already a truism of Egypt’s post-Mubarak politics that liberal activists were responsible for the takeoff of the revolution but, so far, Islamists and the military have been defining the landing. That is to say that the spark of revolutionary activity came largely from secular youth, who rather ingeniously organized the massive protests that caught the regime – and themselves -- by surprise

on Police Day, January 25. Islamists were slow to the fray. However, sensing an opportunity, Islamists grabbed it. When, over the next ten days, the regime tested the option of using real military force to quash the protests, the protestors' most effective and best organized manpower came from two sources – first, the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist allies and second, the well-oiled machines of soccer fan clubs and soccer team security forces. Only the former, of course, had a strategic political agenda, and from the moment the Islamists committed themselves to the fight, their goal has been to capture, exploit and inherit the revolution.

For the Muslim Brotherhood, the demise of the Mubarak regime provided an opening to regularize their role in Egyptian political life after decades on the political margins or in the political shadows. That is to say that the Brotherhood recognized that a post-Mubarak Egypt might provide an opportunity for it to resume legitimate political activity after decades of an uneasy relationship with the country's military leadership.

Here, one should recall the Brotherhood's long and checkered history in modern Egypt. Founded in 1928 by the schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood was conceived as a movement to revitalize Egyptian society, combat Western ideas, philosophy and cultural mores, and fight colonialism, imperialism and Zionism through the spread of Islamic law, practice, custom and tradition. While the Brotherhood always maintained an important focus on education and social welfare as critical to its proselytization (*darwa*) efforts, with striking speed, it developed into a major player on the domestic political scene, complete with a secretive, armed element that terrorized Egyptian society. That terrorism and the radical political philosophy on which it was based led to the imprisonment and execution of Brotherhood leaders, a ban on the Muslim Brotherhood as a political organization, and the inclusion in the 1971 constitution of a prohibition of political parties based on religion.

The MB's relationship with the Egyptian regime, however, has long been more complex than that. Under the Mubarak presidency, for example, the Brotherhood remained a banned political entity and the regime periodically threw large numbers of Brotherhood activists in jail. At the same time, however, the regime reached tactical arrangements with the Brotherhood which allowed the Brotherhood to operate vast social welfare programs, especially in areas where the civil government was dysfunctional, and even to compete in limited fashion in legislative elections, so long as the MB candidates campaigned as "independents." There were various rationales involved in this policy – part of this was to provide an outlet to permit the influential Islamist current in society let off steam; part of this was an internal security imperative of finding

some way to get social services to citizens when the government could not deliver it itself; part of it was an insurance policy purchased by the regime to protect itself from popular attack for its maintenance of peace with Israel and counter-terror partnership with the United States; and part of it was to project both at home and abroad the idea that Islamists were such a potent threat that accepting the authoritarianism of the Mubarak regime was a small price to pay to ensure stability in as vital a country as Egypt. The bottom line was that politics in Egypt stultified – one aspect of the tacit agreement between the Islamists and the regime was to undermine the most attractive alternative to the regime, i.e., non-Islamists (liberals, democrats, leftists, etc.) and the Islamists’ own political fortunes were nearly always determined by the whim of the regime. So, when the regime decided in 2005 that it needed to underscore to Washington the danger of the “freedom agenda,” it orchestrated elections which gave 20 percent of parliament to the MB, and when the regime decided in 2010 that it had proved its point, it orchestrated elections in which the MB did not win a single seat.

(While this testimony focuses on the Egyptian face of the Brotherhood, it is important to note that the Brotherhood was always, at its core, an international movement, which rejected the idea of the nation-state and sought eventually to recreate the Islamic caliphate. While there is no Islamist Comintern, with a central committee guiding the activities of local Muslim Brotherhood chapters in far-flung countries around the globe, there are important doctrinal, ideological, political, strategic and personal connections that link Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and sister-movements and organizations around the world. Hence, for example, the Islamic Resistance Movement -- otherwise known as Hamas -- defines itself as the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood.)

The demise of Hosni Mubarak raised, for the Brotherhood, the prospect of returning to the political stage as a fully legitimate actor. This has required the Brotherhood to adopt a very delicate balance between, on the one hand, embracing the ideals of change, democracy and revolution and, on the other hand, redefining and updating the tacit arrangements with the military, which remains (if uneasily) in control of the pace, content and direction of political change in Egypt. The result is complexity, contradiction and paradox. Brotherhood members and sympathizers have been deeply engaged in all political dialogues with the post-Mubarak military government; Brotherhood leaders were the most vocal supporters of the military’s constitutional amendments, as seen in their support for the “yes” vote in the recent referendum; and Brotherhood leaders have been strong advocates for a speedy electoral timetable, which would

maximize their advantage in organization over their liberal and leftist political competitors. At the same time, elements within the Brotherhood have built important political coalitions with key liberal and leftist activists; fought bravely against the Egyptian security forces when the regime used force and violence against Tahrir Square protestors during and after the events of January-February; and called for swift justice against mainstays of the Mubarak regime. If these positions are, at times, contradictory, that is the nature of politics in post-Mubarak Egypt.

To add further to the complexity of the situation, the Brotherhood does not occupy the Islamist space on the Egyptian political spectrum all by itself. There are at least six different elements within the overall Islamist current. Moving from the most radical to the most liberal, these include: the al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah /Islamic Jihad, organized by former convicts imprisoned for their role in the Sadat assassination; the extremist Salafiyun, who have been implicated in destruction of Sufi shrines and sectarian violence against Copts; the Brotherhood and its new political party, the Freedom and Justice Party; the liberal wing of the Brotherhood (represented by possible presidential candidate Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh and his proto-party, an-Nahda/Renaissance); the Youth of the Brotherhood, which sometimes coalesces with liberal and leftist youth; and the al-Wasat/Center party, which is led by disaffected Brotherhood members. The extent to which these divisions within the Islamist trend are real is unknown. One implication of this variety of Islamist political groupings – especially the fact impact of the emergence of the Salafis as political actors -- is that it has the effect of making the Brotherhood look more mainstream and moderate, by comparison. That, indeed, might be the rationale for these divisions all along. (One additional facet of Islamist politics is the extent to which a variety of groups reportedly receive funding from foreign sources, especially from Saudi Arabia and Gulf. Informed observers especially focus on Salafi groups as recipients of this funding, which has the potential to distort the local political environment.)

### **The Brotherhood, Elections and Political Power**

I believe deep concern about the Muslim Brotherhood's potential emergence as a major player and even power-broker is warranted. As I noted in previous congressional testimony, the Brotherhood is not, as some suggest, simply an Egyptian version of the March of Dimes – that is, a social welfare organization whose goals are fundamentally humanitarian. On the contrary, the Brotherhood is a profoundly political organization that seeks to reorder Egyptian (and broader Muslim) society in an Islamist fashion. Tactically, I believe the organization will exploit whatever opportunities it is offered; it has renounced its most ambitious goals and the violent means to

achieve them only as a result of regime compulsion, not by free choice. Should the Brotherhood achieve political power, it will almost certainly use that power to transform Egypt into a very different place. The best case analogy would be Turkey under Erdogan, where the secular state is gradually being Islamized. A more realistic situation would see deeper and more systemic Islamization of society, including the potential for a frightening growth of sectarianism between Muslims and Copts and even deepening intra-Muslim conflict between Salafis and Sufis.

However, while extreme wariness and caution is warranted, it would be a mistake for the United States to operate under the assumption that the Brotherhood's ascension to power is inevitable, given the country's broad range of political alternatives. In fact, such an assumption is very dangerous and could itself lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, a close look at the 2005 elections and the March referendum results suggests there is considerable reason to believe that the Brotherhood does not command majority support among the Egyptian public. Moreover, recent actions by the Supreme Military Council – most notably its maintenance of the most important elements of the Mubarak-era constitution – suggests that the Egyptian military does not intend to change an electoral system that effectively prevents the Brotherhood from achieving political power through the ballot box.

Still, it is important for Washington to be vigilant about the mainstreaming of the Brotherhood in Egyptian political life and the impetus this would give to the Islamization of domestic politics and foreign policy. Based on the words of Islamist leaders and the experiences of Islamists in and around governments in other Arab countries, implications of this would be felt in numerous arenas – from social mores, to education policy, to Egypt's regional policies. This would have particular impact on Egypt's peace with Israel. In recent weeks, Brotherhood leaders have downplayed their previous statements calling for a national referendum to determine whether Egypt should continue to adhere to its peace treaty, saying little more than this is an issue that the new democratic parliament should address. Most likely, the military's firm position to maintain Egypt's international commitments has made it unacceptable to talk about abrogating the treaty or advocating political steps toward that goal. Still, in an Islamized Egypt, the future frigidity of Egypt-Israel peace is likely to make the experience of the last couple of decades look warm and cozy by comparison. This will have practical effect in Egypt's policy toward Gaza, in Egypt's policing of Sinai, in Egypt's sale of natural gas to Israel and in the continued operation of the Qualified Industrial Zones set up inside Egypt to build Egypt-Israel economic cooperation and

access to the U.S. market. Of course, in all these ways – and more -- a more Islamist Egypt would also have serious deleterious ramifications for the U.S.-Egyptian relationship.

### **U.S. Interests and U.S. policy**

In addressing the Islamist challenge to democracy in Egypt, it is necessary for the U.S. government to strike a wise balance between, on the one hand, being alive to the dangers that the Brotherhood and its allies post to critical U.S. interests and, on the other hand, providing the Brotherhood with a political gift in the form of lightning-rod statements or actions that could motivate voters otherwise indifferent to the Brotherhood's message to come out and support the movement.

Privately, the Administration should engage with the Supreme Military Council on U.S. concerns so that technical decisions are not taken in framing an electoral process that inadvertently abets the Brotherhood's political prospects. In addition, we should share information with them on the foreign funding of Islamist groups, parties and movements with an eye to insulating Egypt's democratic experiment from nefarious interests of outside powers.

Publicly, it is important for the Administration to send a clear message to the political elite and voting public in Egypt about what sort of Egypt we can envision as a partner. Broadly speaking, U.S. interests are best served by supporting a transition to an Egyptian government that:

- shows, through action, its commitment to the universal freedoms of speech, assembly, thought, and religion, and to a free press; that encourages religious liberty and both practices and enforces religious tolerance for all minorities; that supports the rights of people to communicate freely, including through the internet, without interference; and that combats extremism in all its forms, including those based on religion;
- represents, through democratic norms and practices (including free and fair elections for president and parliament), the legitimate political, economic, and social aspirations of its people and that endeavors, in all practicable ways, to meet them;
- respects the rule of law and the institutions of justice; recognizes the vital importance of an independent judiciary; and fights corruption at all levels of government;
- is committed to fulfill its international obligations, including (but not limited to) freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal; peace with Israel and the expansion of peace

- throughout the region; the fight against extremism and terrorism; peaceful resolution of the Sudan conflict (including recognition of partition); and all other treaty obligations and duties incumbent upon a peace-loving member of the United Nations;
- affirms its bilateral partnership with the United States to advance security and peace in the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean.

This is the Egypt that merits full U.S. political support and financial assistance, including both economic and military aid. As Egyptians begin to make political choices about their future leadership and strategic direction, Washington should project a clear message that it stands ready to provide such aid to a government that can endorse these principles and work toward their implementation in practice. A Brotherhood-led, -guided or -inspired government of Egypt would not meet this test.

To give these principles real political impact, it would also be important for the Administration to act now to create incentives to encourage Egyptians to choose the sort of leadership with whom we can build a special relationship, i.e., an Egypt guided by the principles outlined above. Among the incentives Washington should consider are: opening negotiations for a free trade agreement; expansion of the QIZ program; an early loan to the government of Egypt collateralized by the Mubarak-era seized assets; and a dramatic increase in education initiatives, including substantial expansion of university-to-university programs that would bring Egyptian students to the United States and create distance learning opportunities for many more of them.