

Egypt Two Years After Morsi

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May 20, 2015

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Articles & Testimony

Although the Obama administration is right to be concerned about Egypt's domestic political trajectory, conditioning the bilateral strategic relationship on Cairo's progress toward democracy will only make matters worse under the current circumstances.

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Nearly two years ago, on June 30, 2013, unprecedented millions of protestors descended on the central squares across Egypt to demand President Mohamed Morsi's ouster. While Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, had narrowly won the June 2012 presidential elections, he rapidly lost support. Morsi's assertion of total executive power through a November 2012 constitutional declaration alienated a substantial cross section of the Egyptian public, setting off frequent -- and often violent -- demonstrations that continued for months. Meanwhile, as the economy plummeted and the tide of popular opinion shifted further against Morsi, Egypt's state institutions mutinied: bureaucracies became unresponsive to Brotherhood ministers, police refused to guard Brotherhood properties, and in some cases uniformed officers even stood alongside anti-Morsi protestors in the streets. As a result, the Egyptian state was on the brink of collapse: by the time the massive June 30, 2013, demonstrations began, Morsi controlled practically nothing on the ground, and he was reduced to being a president in name only.

The Muslim Brotherhood, however, utterly misinterpreted the depth of this crisis, and refused to negotiate a political solution, such as early elections or a referendum on Morsi's presidency. Instead, it mobilized thousands of its cadres to defend Morsi's "legitimacy," and indicated that it would use violence if necessary. At the Brotherhood's protest site in northern Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya Square, I personally witnessed hundreds of Muslim Brothers marching in formation as a vigilante group, chanting threatening slogans. Meanwhile, clashes between Muslim Brothers and their opponents erupted throughout the country, in which dozens were killed.

This is the context in which Egypt's military, led by then defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, removed Morsi from power on July 3, 2013. Egypt was on the verge of severe civil strife, if not civil war, and many Egyptians feared that their country was headed the way of Syria or Libya. Indeed, from the perspective of the generals and many Egyptians, Sisi's decision to oust Morsi saved Egypt from outright chaos.

Yet the manner in which Morsi was removed from power had significant consequences for Egypt's democratic prospects. By toppling Morsi, the Egyptian military locked itself in a kill-or-be-killed struggle with the Brotherhood. The generals and their supporters believe that they must destroy the Brotherhood, or risk the Brotherhood remobilizing, returning to power, and seeking vengeance for Morsi's overthrow. And by the same token, the Brotherhood seeks to destroy the current government. In this vein, Brotherhood leaders openly call for Sisi's death, and the Brotherhood released a statement in January 2015 calling on its followers to embrace "jihad" and "martyrdom" in fighting the current regime. So after removing Morsi, Egypt's military-backed government launched a brutal crackdown on the Brotherhood, repressing its protests with deadly force while decapitating the Brotherhood's hierarchical command-chain through a massive arrest campaign. This past weekend's death sentences for dozens of Brotherhood figures, including Morsi, constitute merely the latest chapter in the brutal power struggle that has defined Egypt's domestic politics in the post-Morsi period.

The repression, however, has not stopped at the Brotherhood. Because the current regime sees most opposition activity as possibly enabling the Brotherhood's return, it has also cracked down on media criticism, non-Islamist opposition activism, and youth protests. And because many Egyptians are weary of political tumult and frightened by an upsurge of terrorist attacks within Egypt's major cities, they are largely supportive of this crackdown -- and, in many cases, encourage Egypt's police to deal with the Brotherhood and other oppositionists even more forcefully.

Of course, these dynamics are quite dispiriting for those who hoped that the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings represented the dawn of a more democratic era in the Arab world, with Egypt leading the way. And Washington should in no way downplay the current Egyptian government's repressiveness, such as by declaring that Cairo is "transitioning toward democracy," as Secretary of State John Kerry did in July 2014. But Washington should be realistic about its ability to influence Egypt in a more democratic direction so long as the government and the Muslim Brotherhood remain in a life-and-death struggle with each other.

To be sure, the Obama administration has tried. In October 2013, the administration withheld most of the \$1.3 billion in annual military aid to Egypt "pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government." This was a lose-lose proposition: withholding military aid had no impact on Egypt's domestic politics, which remained quite autocratic, and at the same time it soured the strategic relationship between Washington and Cairo. In lieu of the U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets that are part of Egypt's military aid package, Egypt inked a \$5.4 billion weapons deal with France. It also signed a preliminary \$3.5 billion weapons deal with Russia, and granted Russian president Vladimir Putin a hero's welcome when he visited Cairo in February 2015. Meanwhile, Egypt reportedly partnered with the United Arab Emirates to attack jihadist sites in Libya without coordinating with Washington, and similarly rejected U.S. assistance in Sinai.

The Obama administration effectively recognized its blunder seventeen months later, in March 2015, when it announced that it would resume the \$1.3 billion in aid to Egypt. But to signal its ongoing displeasure with Egypt's domestic political trajectory, it announced the end of cash-flow financing of aid to Egypt after 2017. As a result, the U.S.-Egypt relationship will likely remain tense: if Cairo cannot depend on the reliable flow of aid that cash-flow financing entails, it will likely continue turning to other partners for weapons, including partners that do not necessarily share U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Fueling this tension isn't in Washington's interests, given Egypt's role as an important U.S. strategic partner. Egypt has maintained a peace treaty with Israel since 1979, and coordinates with Washington on a wide range of regional

activities, including counterterrorism and diplomacy. Washington further relies on Egypt to grant preferred access in the Suez Canal and overflight rights to equip U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf, and to support the current efforts against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

But perhaps more to the point, the Sisi government represents a major opportunity for Washington, because it is significantly more closely aligned with U.S. interests than the Brotherhood-dominated government that preceded it. Consider the following:

- **Egypt is once again a strategic partner against Iran.** Following former president Hosni Mubarak's ouster in February 2011, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) reversed more than three decades of tense relations with Iran by permitting Iranian warships to transit the Suez Canal. Egypt-Iran relations warmed further under Morsi. His August 2012 visit to Tehran marked the first visit by an Egyptian leader since 1979, and Morsi hosted then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Cairo in February 2013. The Brotherhood viewed its engagement with Iran as a mechanism for moving away from Washington's orbit and having more "balanced" global relations. Under Sisi, however, Egypt has returned to its prior anti-Iran posture: it has deployed its navy to prevent the Iran-backed Houthis from disrupting maritime traffic in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. So as the Obama administration seeks a nuclear arrangement with Iran, strengthening the U.S.-Egypt relationship can help reassure Washington's Sunni Arab allies in the Persian Gulf that the United States isn't pivoting toward Tehran.
- **Egypt is, for the first time in its history, aggressively battling jihadists in the Sinai.** For many years, the Egyptian government rebuffed Washington's calls to confront jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptian military did not want to be held responsible for operations that, in its view, were the purview of intelligence and the Ministry of Interior. And during his year in power, Morsi similarly refused to authorize an aggressive campaign against the jihadists, since the Brotherhood believed that its electoral success would convince the jihadists to lay down their arms and embrace the Brotherhood's approach of "implementing sharia" through the ballot box. As a result, the jihadist threat grew significantly, and exploded in the months that followed Morsi's ouster, during which hundreds of Egyptian security personnel were killed. Since September 2013, however, the Egyptian military has been actively fighting the Sinai jihadists, some of whom have declared their loyalty to ISIS. The Egyptian military has also aggressively targeted the tunnel network that links Sinai and Gaza, which the jihadists used for escaping Sinai to hide and receive medical treatment.
- **Egypt's relationship with Israel has never been stronger.** Despite being president of a country that signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, Morsi refused to establish a communication channel between his presidential office and the Israeli government. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood repeatedly signaled that it intended to alter or end the peace treaty, such as by holding a popular referendum or parliamentary vote on it. By contrast, President Sisi communicates directly with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu -- and openly acknowledges this fact. The Sisi era has also witnessed unprecedented coordination between Israel and Egypt on counterterrorism in the Sinai.
- **Egypt is constraining, rather than aiding, Hamas.** Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Morsi's victory in the June 2012 elections benefited it considerably. Morsi became the first Egyptian president to welcome Hamas officials to the presidential palace in Cairo, thereby affording Hamas the same diplomatic treatment as the Palestinian Authority receives. Morsi's ouster, however, reversed Hamas's fortunes: Hamas leaders' diplomatic access in Cairo diminished and its office in a Cairo suburb was shut down. Meanwhile, the Egyptian military has taken unprecedented measures to close the tunnels that are used to smuggle goods, weapons, and personnel from Sinai into Gaza.

To be sure, the Obama administration is right to be concerned about Egypt's domestic political trajectory, and it should use its diplomatic engagement with the Sisi government to encourage greater tolerance and political pluralism. But if Washington conditions its strategic relationship with Cairo on Egypt's progress toward democracy,

it won't achieve democracy in Egypt given the current circumstances, and will hurt the bilateral strategic relationship in the process.

The current regional environment makes it particularly urgent for Washington to restore its relationship with Egypt on the basis of shared strategic interests. Specifically, Congress should encourage the Obama administration to proceed with the "strategic dialogue" that Cairo has requested since early 2014. This is an important opportunity to review the military aid relationship in a bilateral setting, and to coordinate both countries' strategies on a wide range of regional challenges.

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