

Iran, Syria, and Egypt

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Articles & Testimony

The perception that the White House is determined to include the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's political process could hamper the Iran and Syria negotiations, among other ill effects.

The U.S. is now pursuing deals in Geneva with both Iran and Syria -- two long-time brutal, dictatorial, enemy regimes. At the same time, the U.S. is estranging itself from Egypt, a long-time, major, and only mildly autocratic ally. To paraphrase Talleyrand, this is worse than hypocritical, it is mistaken.

Advocates for this policy say the difference is that the U.S. actually provides aid to Egypt -- so we should use it as leverage to promote democracy there. But, aside from the fact that this demonstrably does not work, it also turns logic on its head. Aid to Egypt is not a favor for democracy but an investment in a friendly government that supports vital U.S. interests: counter-terrorism, strategic access, peace with Israel, good relations with the key oil-producing Arab states. Instead, today we once again witness the absurd spectacle of the U.S. trying to put pressure only on its friends, but not on its enemies, to reform their internal political systems.

Moreover, the current tactical nuclear deal with Iran adds several new reasons to strengthen, not strain, U.S. relations with Egypt. First, this would help reassure nervous U.S. allies, from the Gulf to Israel and beyond, that the U.S. will still stick with its friends -- of which Egypt in particular is of crucial importance. Second, by reinforcing U.S. allies and options in the region, it would maintain an extra incentive for Iran to negotiate an acceptable long-term nuclear agreement. Third, solid ties with Egypt are a good insurance policy to bolster core U.S. regional alliances in case the Iran deal goes sour.

The last refuge of the "cut aid" school is that this would be for Egypt's own good, because only pressure for reform will promote long-term stability there. Yet given the zero-sum contest between the military and the Brotherhood, wavering support for Egypt's government is actually more likely to encourage its mortal opponents to wage jihad against it -- thereby escalating violence and condemning 90 million Egyptians to longer suffering. So the advocates of pressure for democracy would end up provoking the very instability they claim to abjure. For all of these reasons, the political future of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is not in the interest of the United States.

Instead, the main pillar of the US-Egyptian relationship has been military to military cooperation. Washington's deep-rooted strategic security relationship with the strongest Arab army has played a major role in its war against Al-Qaeda and counterterrorism operations, and in regional energy and geopolitical security. But the current Obama administration policy towards Egypt is putting these common interests in jeopardy.

The future of US military aid to Egypt is at the forefront of this concern. The State Department issued a statement on October 9, explaining that some aid would be suspended, but could resume "pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government." However, it remains unclear what is meant by "inclusiveness." A very wide range of Egyptians have been included in the political process since the ouster of the Morsi regime. Even some salafists, a more orthodox Islamic movement in Egypt, are part of the process.

Even the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, was also initially invited to partake in the July 3 transition. However, they refused the invitation, and have remained in denial about these events. The denial turned into a campaign to reverse the clock, with Brotherhood leaders inciting violence in rallies against the Egyptian state and civilians supportive of Morsi's removal. This prompted the arrest of many Muslim Brotherhood leaders. Yet senior Brotherhood figures outside prison, such as Amr Darrag, have yet to accept the new political realities on the ground.

Under these circumstances, the perception that the White House is determined to include the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's political process further unsettles the entire geo-political environment in the Middle East. The suspension of aid was welcomed by the Muslim Brotherhood, and indirectly encourages it to remain defiant. The jihadists and terrorists in Sinai, who have assassinated and committed dozens of terrorist attacks against Egyptian soldiers, welcome any decision by Obama that weakens or pressures the Egyptian Armed Forces, their sole enemy at the moment.

Secretary Hagel and Secretary Kerry have been supportive of the interim government in Egypt, with Kerry very publicly acknowledging that Egypt is "restoring democracy." He explained that "the military was asked to intervene by millions and millions of people" after the revolution was "stolen by the one single most organized entity in the state, which was the Brotherhood." These comments stand in contradiction to Susan Rice, who maintained that "After the interim government...us[ed] massive violence against civilians, the United States made clear that we could not conduct business as usual."

This internal tension ought to be resolved quickly, guided by the clear strategic interests of the United States. Given President Obama's own new, narrower definition of those core interests in his UNGA address a few months ago, his Administration (and its allies in Congress) need no longer even pretend that Egypt is fully democratic. The upcoming January constitutional referendum, which the EU has just agreed to monitor, would be a suitable early occasion for the U.S. to resume full aid to Egypt. In a turbulent Middle East, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has never been more important. The Iran deal and the upcoming Geneva II conference on Syria add still another set of sound reasons to restore that vital relationship, rather than undermine it by the continued suspension of aid.

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