

# Getting Egypt Right This Time

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Jul 9, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

---

## International legitimacy and international aid are Washington's best sources of leverage for convincing the Egyptian military and its allies to act responsibly.

In the aftermath of the Egyptian military's ouster of President Mohamed Morsy, much of the debate in Washington has focused on the question of U.S. aid. Should the United States call the military's action a coup and suspend aid as demanded by the law, or not? The answer has been hotly debated, with prominent analysts and former officials coming down on either side.

But the question itself is the wrong one, and the narrow focus on U.S. aid is misplaced. As is the case with the long debate on arming the opposition and setting up a no-fly zone in Syria, it is generally misguided in foreign policy to zero in on and debate a specific tactic in the absence of any clear sense of one's objective or strategy for achieving it.

In the case of Egypt, the United States has a number of interests at play, but the one most relevant to current events is regional stability. For Egypt to play a positive role in maintaining the stability of the region, it must not only pursue stabilizing foreign policies -- such as maintaining its peace treaty with Israel and working to counter terrorism and nuclear proliferation -- but it must also be stable domestically.

Morsy seemed willing, at least initially, to pursue stabilizing foreign policies; however, his majoritarian -- and increasingly authoritarian -- approach to governing further destabilized Egypt rather than stabilizing it. At a moment when Egyptians needed their best and brightest to coalesce around principles and plans to lead their country out of political and economic crisis, Morsy sought to institutionalize Islamist ideology and amass as much power as possible for his own movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, to the exclusion of others.

The Egyptian military's solution to Morsy's misrule, however, offers little consolation to U.S. policymakers. Not only does it appear to portend increased violence, since the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists will not simply acquiesce or fade away, but the disparate groups that came together to oust Morsy do not appear to have any clearer plan than he did for pulling post-Mubarak Egypt out of its state of persistent and deepening crisis.

Washington would have preferred that Morsy be removed -- or his power diluted -- through a political power-sharing deal, which would have avoided the first problem by keeping the Brotherhood in politics and off the streets, and which would have potentially helped address the second. The challenge for U.S. policymakers now is to achieve the result that Barack Obama's administration seemed to prefer before June 30 -- a coalition government focused on alleviating Egypt's crisis -- against the backdrop of a military intervention and escalating violence.

In practical terms, this requires a quick transition from military rule to a civilian government, though not necessarily an elected one at first. To avoid a repeat of the mistakes and turbulence of Morsy's tenure, the United States should emphasize pluralism and respect for human rights; the building of democratic institutions, especially a constitution conforming to broad principles to which most Egyptians can agree, and the development of political parties; and the development of a plan for resolving the economic crisis -- rather than calling for immediate elections. Elections are necessary but, as Morsy so clearly demonstrated, not sufficient to make a democracy.

This brings one back to the question of U.S. military assistance to Egypt. While significant at \$1.3 billion, this assistance does not provide the United States with much leverage over the Egyptian military. This was vividly illustrated over the past week, during which Egypt's generals disregarded the Obama administration's explicit and public warning not to oust Morsy.

While both Egypt and the United States reap benefits from their military relationship, the logic of providing Cairo with a steady stream of tanks and jets has eroded as the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli wars have faded into history. It may make sense to reconfigure and renegotiate that relationship, but the United States should be under no illusions that threatening to do so will compel Egypt's generals to do what it asks.

What does appear to concern Egypt's military and its allies, however, is the stigma that accompanies the "coup" designation, with its strong connotation of illegitimacy. If the United States makes such a designation, it is reasonable to expect that others will follow, compromising whatever government succeeds Morsy's. This provides Washington with leverage, but it will largely disappear once a determination is made. Thus, the best course of action is to defer the decision temporarily, giving the military and its allies time and incentive to act responsibly.

The other major source of leverage that the United States should seek to employ is international assistance. The economic disaster that loomed prior to Morsy's ouster continues to hang over Egypt, threatening the success of any government, however it is constituted. To emerge successfully from this crisis, Egypt will require external financing in the form of both official assistance and private investment. While U.S. aid is too small to make much of a difference to Egypt's fortunes, the sum total of assistance that can be offered by America's allies is far more significant.

To credibly put these two incentives -- international legitimacy and international aid -- on the table, Washington will need to make a major push to line up the support of allies within the region and outside it. The most skeptical may be America's Persian Gulf allies, most of which welcome Morsy's fall, and all of which have been displeased with U.S. policy, not only toward Egypt but toward other regional issues. Getting these allies on board will require overcoming a perception of U.S. passivity and inconstancy and demonstrating a willingness to act decisively not just on this issue, but also on others of vital importance to them, such as Syria and Iran.

In Egypt, the United States has been given a second chance it hoped not to require. To make the most of it, American policymakers should view it not just as a chance to revisit U.S. policy toward Egypt, but to reassert American leadership in the Middle East.

*Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute.* ❖

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)