

A Conversation on Egypt's Future

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.

Al-Wafd correspondent Hend Selim interviews David Pollock on Sinai insecurity, sectarian strife, Suez development controversies, and other issues currently being debated in Egypt.

You said that a Caliphate state could be established in Egypt, yet the Muslim Brotherhood regime faces popular discontent and a campaign to overthrow its rule. Can the Brotherhood establish a Caliphate in light of these developments?

No, I don't believe a Caliphate state could or should be established in Egypt, even if that is what the more hardline interpretations of Brotherhood ideology might suggest. For one thing, a Caliphate usually presupposes some degree of unity, or at least common legitimacy, among different, predominantly Muslim states and societies. That is hardly the case today or in the foreseeable future.

Another crucial obstacle, even inside Egypt, is as you say the increasing popular discontent with Brotherhood rule. This does not appear to me to threaten its overthrow any time soon, but it does put some pressure on the Brotherhood to move gradually and pay at least lip service to certain democratic rather than purely theocratic norms. I think the Brotherhood's record in power so far proves that it is not truly democratic, except in the superficial sense that it accepts majority rule, as long as it can claim a majority. It is trying to get exclusive control over the major institutions of state and society, yes. Yet at the same time, it is not actually moving to govern strictly according to sharia, and it proclaims that there will be new free elections in the future. This suggests that even the Brotherhood understands that a true Caliphate for Egypt is simply not in the cards.

Some reports say that Morsi intends to give Sinai to the Palestinians, especially since he has allowed them to visit the peninsula without visas at a time when his government is losing control there. What do you think about the future of Sinai?

No, I don't think Morsi wants or plans to give up control over Sinai, and certainly not to turn it over to the Palestinians. On the contrary, here I think he is working with Egypt's army to reassert greater control, avoid provocations against Israel, and generally adopt a relatively pragmatic posture. I don't think Morsi wants to get

dragged into another big conflict between Hamas and Israel, or to cede the Sinai completely to smugglers and jihadis. The results would be even more dangerous for Egypt than for Israel or anyone else. Conversely, I think Israel is showing some flexibility and patience by encouraging Egypt to police its own border zones more effectively. It is true that Egypt could probably do more to govern, patrol, and develop the Sinai in a responsible fashion. But the deficiencies seem to me more a matter of capability and competence, and of much more pressing internal priorities elsewhere, than of support for Palestinians or malicious intent toward Israel.

Arguments have emerged over the Suez Canal development project. Most Egyptian experts are concerned about the current proposals, while the Morsi government claims that its plan will increase the canal's returns and ease Egypt's economic crisis. How do you view the project?

Honestly, I'm not an expert on this project. From what I do understand, one of the basic issues lately is the strong popular resentment of Cairo in the Suez Canal cities, leading to frequent large demonstrations and overall insecurity. As a result, much of that area is now more or less under some form of military government. I suppose many residents also see canal projects as primarily benefiting central government revenues rather than local employment, standard of living, or quality of life. And indeed, with tourism and investment slumping, while political stability remains uncertain, the canal has become ever more central to Cairo's foreign currency needs -- and to Egypt's strategic value. All of this greatly complicates the situation and puts any development project under a cloud.

A document was leaked about an agreement between the Brotherhood-led government and Qatar that would allow Doha to establish an industrial city in Suez and invest heavily in the canal project. Also, there are strong relations between Qatar and the Brotherhood in the Arab world. For example, Doha supported the Brotherhood during elections in Egypt and Tunisia. What do you expect Qatar's role will be in shaping the Arab world in the coming era? Will Doha lead the Arab world?

Qatar has become an increasingly indispensable source of funding for Egypt's new government since the revolution more than two years ago. Without its grants, loans, bank deposits, under-the-table cash payments, and now promises of natural gas deliveries, Egypt and the Brotherhood might well have been faced with an extreme economic crisis by now. It is truly remarkable and ironic that a tiny, faraway monarchy with barely a quarter of a million citizens has so much influence today over Egypt, whose 85 million citizens make it by far the largest Arab state -- and supposedly a newly democratic one as well.

But partly for that reason, Qatar could never be the genuine leader of the Arabs. It is just too small, too undemocratic, and too weak, even if wildly wealthy. And it has too many rivals: every other Arab state, starting with Saudi Arabia next door, is naturally and properly jealous of its own sovereignty. A good current example of Qatar's limits is that its proxy intervention in the Syrian civil war is turning unsuccessful. Even Aljazeera TV is losing audience and influence to local media!

Sectarian violence is increasing in Egypt, and problems are emerging with the Nuba in the south. As a result, some fear that the country will be divided between Muslims and Christians, and that the Nuba will become separate. How do you expect these issues to unfold?

Christian-Muslim tensions are indeed a major problem for Egypt, and much more so under Morsi than before. Unfortunately, I think this is almost an inevitable byproduct of bringing a more fundamentalist Islamist government to power -- and Morsi has compounded the problem by showing so little sensitivity to or support for Egyptians' equal rights. Social cleavages and conditions further aggravate the problem, but it should be the government's first responsibility to protect all its people.

Nevertheless, I see no prospect at all of Egypt somehow dividing into sectarian enclaves. The Copts are simply too mixed in with other Egyptians, too numerous, and too integrated into Egypt's society and economy to make this

feasible -- and even now, Egypt's government and security forces are too powerful and determined to prevent such an outcome.

Regarding the Nuba in the south, I see them as too few and too disorganized to pose any real threat of secession or something like it, despite their growing disgruntlement with Egypt's new regime and the prevailing atmosphere of instability and popular protest. The more urgent threat from the south may be access to Nile waters, not ethnic conflict.

Some analysts believe that events in Egypt will lead to the fulfillment of "the Greater Middle East Project." What do you think?

Here I must confess confusion: what is "the Greater Middle East Project"? If you mean some kind of American plan for the region, as was briefly talked about under President Bush, then I would insist that no such thing is relevant in any way today. In Egypt, at least, the "Arab Spring" has really meant that the country's people took their fate into their own hands. Moreover, I think that will largely continue to be the case. The U.S. now has neither the will nor the means to mold Egypt, let alone the region as a whole, to its liking. Any notion to the contrary strikes me as just another baseless conspiracy theory -- of which I know the Greater Middle East has plenty, almost all of them false.

Israeli president Shimon Peres said, "Arabs tried Egypt's leadership of the region for fifty years. They have to try Israel's leadership." Will Israel lead the Middle East in the coming era in light of the challenges facing Egypt?

I must say I don't think this is an accurate quote. Perhaps Peres was talking about democracy, not about Israel, as the wave of the future for the region. Israel has democracy and many other achievements to its credit, it is one of the region's important powers, and it is prepared to cooperate with others in finding common interests -- but there is no way it can lead the whole Middle East alone. It is too small, too distinct, and too focused on its own special situation (including the intractable Palestinian problem) to ever aspire to such a status. I recently had the opportunity to meet personally with Shimon Peres, and I can tell you he hoped for more American rather than Israeli leadership in the region.

It is true that Egypt's claim to regional leadership is very much in question right now, largely because of its difficult new internal challenges. Still, if Egyptians can concentrate for a while on democracy and economic development, and later on constructive diplomacy, they have a reasonable chance of resuming their role as one of the region's real leaders -- at least in the medium-term future. Personally I hope to see that happen, but the choice is mostly Egypt's to make on its own.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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