Back to Mubarak

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Articles & Testimony

Two years after Egypt's revolution, U.S. diplomacy comes full circle.

Long after the moving images of Egypt's Facebook-addicted, pro-democratic revolutionaries faded from Tahrir Square, they have remained firmly implanted in the minds of American observers 6,000 miles away. For much of the two years since Egypt's uprising, many observers in Washington seemingly believed that anything in Cairo that wasn't Mubarak was a step in a democratic direction.

So even as the post-Mubarak military junta shut down NGOs and killed protesters, and even as the now-ruling Muslim Brotherhood succeeded it by curtailing press freedoms and deploying violence against demonstrators, it was fashionable to declare oneself "optimistic" about Egypt. And to argue otherwise -- to observe, as I frequently did, that two blatantly undemocratic forces were steering Egypt's transition in a decidedly illiberal direction -- was to be accused of rooting against democracy in Egypt.

In recent months, however, the prevailing attitude has changed somewhat. President Mohamed Morsi's blatant power grab in November, coupled with his ramming through an Islamist constitution in December, has dampened the optimism regarding the Brotherhood's commitment to democracy. But in its place, a new conventional wisdom has taken hold: that even if Morsi and his Brotherhood colleagues aren't democrats, they can be partners in advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East. And with this new conventional wisdom comes a new conventional policy approach: that the U.S. shouldn't criticize Morsi for his dictatorial ways, because doing so will jeopardize our strategic relationship with the new Egyptian regime.

In other words, two years after Egyptians dramatically toppled Hosni Mubarak, Washington has the same Mubarak-era policy: ignore the regime's domestic abuses to win its cooperation on foreign policy. But with the current Muslim Brotherhood regime, this is a decidedly bad bet.

That's because cooperation with Washington cannot be reconciled in the long run with the Muslim Brotherhood's deeply anti-Western ideology, which dates back to its 1928 establishment. Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna

envisioned his organization as a vehicle for Islamizing Egyptian society and establishing an Islamic state so that Egypt could resist Western cultural and political influence. The Brotherhood's anti-Westernism remains so central to its ideological vision that, even despite its newfound power and political responsibilities, its tone hasn't moderated. In his most recent weekly statement, Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie drew an analogy between the Prophet Muhammad's victory over his seventh century adversaries and the ultimate triumph of the Brotherhood's "Renaissance Project" over "materialistic" Western civilization, which "made blood and lives the cheapest things in the world."

Deep hostility towards Israel, as well as its historic rejection of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, is similarly engrained in the Muslim Brotherhood's DNA. The Brotherhood was among the earliest opponents of Zionism within the broader Muslim world, and the fact that Brotherhood jihadists fought Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war even after the Arab armies had agreed to a ceasefire remains a point of tremendous pride for the group. (Within the organization, veterans of the 1948 war are given the honorary title of "ach mogahed," meaning "jihadist brother.") Indeed, Morsi's recently unearthed 2010 comments in which he called Jews "the descendants of apes and pigs" were hardly taken out of context, as he now claims. Morsi's hatred for Israel is so profound that he couldn't even control himself in a recent meeting with U.S. senators, when he ranted against Israel and implied that Jews controlled the American media.

Yet for those espousing the new conventional wisdom that the Brotherhood can be a U.S. ally, these anti-Western and anti-Semitic statements are idle talk. Brotherhood leaders may believe these hateful things in their hearts, the wonks say, but they aren't acting on them: the Camp David Accords still stand, and the Brotherhood communicates regularly with U.S. officials. Proponents of the new conventional wisdom took special comfort in Morsi's response to the November Gaza conflict, when Morsi authorized negotiations that yielded a relatively quick Hamas-Israel ceasefire and, through a series of late-night phone calls, supposedly developed a good rapport with President Obama.

Yet as the Brotherhood has demonstrated repeatedly during its first year in power, it is far from sentimental about its relationships with non-Brotherhood outsiders. In this vein, Morsi sat smiling next to Mubarak-era military leaders shortly after his June election to project political calm, and then fired them a month later. He similarly surrounded himself with prominent non-Brotherhood figures during his presidential campaign and promised to rule inclusively if elected, but ultimately sidelined these supporters and drove most of them into the opposition during his November power grab.

It would be naive, therefore, to believe that Morsi won't turn on Washington when he feels the time is right. After all, the Brotherhood is already signaling that it intends to reassess the peace treaty with Israel, which comprises a core American interest: The Brotherhood's political party has recently drafted legislation to unilaterally amend the treaty, and a top Brotherhood foreign policy official recently told a closed salon that Morsi "is cancelling normalization with the Zionist entity gradually." Yet the Brotherhood is unlikely to pursue its anti-Western ambitions until after it finishes consolidating its power at home. As deputy supreme guide Khairat al-Shater explained during the April 2011 unveiling of the "Renaissance Project," the Brotherhood must first build an "Islamic government" before establishing "the global Islamic state."

For this reason, the Obama administration should work to prevent the Brotherhood from consolidating its control of Egypt through a pro-democratic policy. Specifically, Washington should withhold its support for the $4.8 billion loan that Egypt is seeking until the Brotherhood takes demonstrable steps towards more inclusive rule, which should include ending the prosecution of the Brotherhood's political opponents and media critics. It should also deny Morsi an invitation to the White House until he pardons the pro-democratic NGO workers who are still on trial and permits the return of pro-democratic NGOs to Cairo. Finally, the administration should speak out whenever the Brotherhood

behaves repressively, such as when it dispatches its cadres to violently attack those protesting Morsi's edicts, thereby alerting the international community to Egypt's autocratic trajectory. This would broaden the pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood to moderate its behavior, since its ideology is likely unchangeable.

Failing to do so would mean forgoing the rare opportunity to align U.S. strategic interests with American pro-democratic values. The Muslim Brotherhood, after all, opposes both, and to pretend otherwise is to live in the world of January 24, 2011.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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