

Egypt on the Brink (Again)

by [Steven Cook \(/experts/steven-cook\)](/experts/steven-cook), [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Dec 19, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Steven Cook \(/experts/steven-cook\)](/experts/steven-cook)

Steven Cook is the Eni Enrico Mattei Senior Fellow for Middle East and Africa Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On December 14, 2012, Steven Cook, Eric Trager, and Shalom Cohen addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Cook is the Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of *The Struggle for Egypt* (2011). Mr. Trager, the Institute's Next Generation fellow, is completing his dissertation on *Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood*. Mr. Cohen, the Institute's former Baye diplomat-in-residence, served as Israel's ambassador to Egypt from 2005 to 2010. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

STEVEN COOK

Since the early twentieth century, no Egyptian party has been able to meet the people's demands for social justice, representative government, and national dignity. In addition, fundamental questions remain unanswered regarding the principles and organization of government and, more critically, the relationship between religion and state. Since Hosni Mubarak's ouster, the Muslim Brotherhood has similarly failed to address these questions in a way that makes sense to Egyptians.

The Brotherhood believes it knows what is best for the country, and past conversations with members of the group's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) foreshadowed President Muhammad Morsi's recent power grab. Earlier this year, some members declared that if they could get rid of regime remnants or parts of the bureaucracy, they would be able to transform the country overnight. This is exactly what the Brotherhood tried to do on November 22, when Morsi granted himself new powers. Although the group viewed the move as a revolutionary act, the form and content of Morsi's decree was similar to what Mubarak used to do.

The subsequent effort to pass a new constitution will ensure continued instability given the content of the draft charter, the Brotherhood's determination to push it through via public referendum, and the reemergence of a genuine grassroots opposition movement that has learned the power of demonstrations. The referendum is still

likely to pass, but the Brotherhood underestimated the extent of the backlash that its way of doing business would invite.

Although Egypt is entering a new stage in which liberals and regime remnants will be the Brotherhood's primary opposition, the more pertinent battle for power may lie between the country's Islamist forces, particularly the Salafists and the Brotherhood. The constitutional amendments that touch on Islamic law are a major source of conflict between these factions and will produce political turbulence that pulls in the religious establishment.

Typically, the only way to establish political control in such a struggle is through threats and violence, though it is unclear who would carry out such measures in this case. The military has no interest in getting involved unless social cohesion is threatened. This was made clear on August 12, when Morsi dismissed the leaders of the ruling military council, Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi and Sami Anan, and guaranteed the new commanders immunity, promotions, and freedom from the burden of governing Egypt on a day-to-day basis. Since the military will not take to the street unless major violence is imminent, the battle remains between the opposition and the Brotherhood.

The U.S. role in this situation is to speak out against antidemocratic principles. America stood on the right side of history during the uprising against Mubarak, so it is incumbent to stand up for democracy, tolerance, nonviolence, accountability, and equal application of the law today. Egyptians do not see Washington as a benevolent power, however, so cutting or conditioning aid may be counterproductive. The most important policy, then, is to avoid sacrificing or compromising the principles that America represents.

ERIC TRAGER

Egypt's constitutional crisis offers three lessons about the Muslim Brotherhood and how it works. First, the group is deeply invested in ratifying a new charter -- a longtime goal that it views as essential to legitimizing its political project. Second, the Brotherhood coordinates with Morsi, and vice versa. Third, Morsi is not a compromiser.

The Brotherhood has sought an Islamic constitution since its fifth conference in 1938, and this goal is also a key component of the "Nahda Project," the FJP's "renaissance" platform for Egypt. In an August 2010 interview, Morsi claimed that constitutions are a mechanism for achieving "freedom." For the Brotherhood, however, "freedom" means having an Islamic state, since it views any non-Islamic system as imposed and therefore not free. Even if the current referendum passes by only a narrow margin, the Brotherhood will believe that it has the necessary mandate to continue ramming its program through, despite objections from an increasingly vociferous opposition.

The crisis has also highlighted the strong, direct coordination between the Brotherhood and Morsi. This is nothing new: the group previously selected the list of candidates from which Morsi appointed governors and state media chiefs, and one of his former aides recently claimed that the president runs "every word" and policy by Brotherhood deputy chairman Khairat al-Shater. Morsi and the Brotherhood leadership are now coordinating on mobilizing cadres to support his latest moves, including the use of violence against opposition protesters in front of the presidential palace on December 5. The evening before the attack, members of the group's Guidance Office met at Morsi's home in a Cairo suburb to plan their response to the protests -- a fact confirmed via phone conversations with three of the leaders in attendance.

As for the revelation that Morsi is not a compromiser, it is hardly surprising given his background. From approximately 2007 to 2011, he was the Brotherhood's internal enforcer, responsible for dismissing members who disagreed with the group's hardline ideology or tactics. He was also the Mubarak regime's main point of contact with the Brotherhood -- a role he was given because of his ability to toe the group's line without conceding anything.

Morsi has been similarly unwilling to back down in the current crisis, even as many non-Brotherhood aides defect from his advisory team and former supporters criticize his actions. For example, Ahmed Maher, the leader of the

opposition "April 6" movement, actively supported him during the second round of the presidential election and joined the Brotherhood-dominated body tasked with drafting the new constitution. But after he criticized Morsi's November 22 decree and the rushed constitution, the Brotherhood threw him under the bus, accusing him of leading "thugs" in protests outside the presidential palace.

Currently, the Obama administration is not pressing Morsi because it sees no alternative to him. It also believes that the president's good working relationship with Morsi, forged during the Gaza ceasefire negotiations, is its best leverage. Yet the Arab Spring showed that even seemingly stable regimes can become unstable very quickly, which is why it is important to engage broadly rather than backing one ruler's power grab. Moreover, the administration should not expect that Morsi's supposedly good relations with Obama will keep him aligned with the United States. He has demonstrated repeatedly that he will run roughshod over former allies in order to advance the Brotherhood's longtime agenda, and he will likely do the same to Washington once he begins pursuing the group's foreign policy aims.

SHALOM COHEN

The Arab Spring did not begin two years ago in Tunisia; it truly began only a few weeks ago in Egypt. The country's latest protests represent the essence of democracy, with two political currents struggling for predominance. This struggle is the true expression of the Arab Spring.

For the first time in modern Arab history, the army did not support the regime, and citizens now have the freedom to express themselves without fear of military crackdown. This leaves the Arab world with two types of societies: those that have political rights and freedoms, and those that still live under tyrannical or police-state regimes. This first step toward freedom is the beginning of a journey that will take many years to complete, but will end with a different Arab world than we know now.

President Morsi came to power claiming that he would care for all Egyptians. Over the past five months, however, the country's condition has continued to deteriorate. The regime is more focused on "Ikhwanization" than on the people -- if it had better understood the full nature of the people's political aspirations, it would have done things differently. Instead, it faces not so much a struggle against Morsi himself, but a wider battle against a new tyranny.

For its part, Israel has two strict principles that guide its policy toward the new Egypt. The first is noninterference in the internal politics of neighboring countries -- since Mubarak's ouster, the Israeli government has refrained from making any statements in the media or international forums that may be seen as interfering in Egypt's political life. Second, Israel has emphasized the importance of maintaining the peace treaty, taking every opportunity to reiterate this position publicly and privately.

Thus far, the Israeli-Egyptian relationship has not suffered materially from the change in regimes, at least at the working level -- dialogue and day-to-day relations continue between the two countries' defense, foreign affairs, and intelligence officials. However, the same cannot be said at the highest level of government, where there is no direct dialogue between Morsi and Israeli leaders on bilateral issues or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given this state of affairs, Israel must remain vigilant to ensure that Cairo takes a pragmatic approach toward bilateral relations, especially regarding the peace treaty.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Heba Dafashy.

[Watch this event on C-SPAN.org \(http://www.c-span.org/Events/Former-Israeli-Ambassador-to-Egypt-Joins-Discussion-on-Recent-Events/10737436594-1/\)](http://www.c-span.org/Events/Former-Israeli-Ambassador-to-Egypt-Joins-Discussion-on-Recent-Events/10737436594-1/). ❖

RECOMMENDED



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)



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)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

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

Arab-Israeli Relations ([/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations](#))

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)