

# Beyond Gaza: The Foreign-Policy Implications of Morsi's Power Grab

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## It's only a matter of time before the Egyptian president's domestic extremism extends to international relations.

Following Cairo's successful mediation of a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel last week, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi won high praise in Washington and abroad. Many interpreted Egypt's negotiations with Israel to conclude the Gaza crisis as a sign that Morsi -- despite his well-documented antipathy for Israel during his years as a Muslim Brotherhood leader -- would uphold the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. As one Obama administration official told the *New York Times*, "This was somebody focused on solving problems."

Yet on closer inspection, Morsi isn't nearly as focused on solving the Middle East's problems as Washington wants to believe. He has merely deferred pursuing the Muslim Brotherhood's hostile foreign policy agenda for now, focusing instead on consolidating his -- and the Brotherhood's -- political power domestically.

Indeed, despite Washington's impression that Morsi assented to peaceful relations with Israel through Egypt's mediation of the Gaza ceasefire, Morsi conceded nothing in the eyes of his Islamist constituents. From their vantage point, Morsi stood firm in his longtime refusal to deal with Israelis, outsourcing this responsibility to Egyptian intelligence officials while dispatching his prime minister to embrace Hamas officials in Gaza.

He also authorized a series of negotiations that ultimately leaves Hamas with greater access to the outside world, and permitted Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to declare victory over Israel at a downtown Cairo press conference.

"Everyone knew that the previous regime was biased and supporting Israel," Muslim Brotherhood party spokesman Murad Ali told me. "The new regime...is standing beside the Palestinians."

Then on Thursday, Morsi threw the Muslim Brotherhood another bone, issuing a new constitutional declaration that insulates the group from pending political threats. In this vein, it allows for the retrial of former Mubarak regime officials, thus complicating the former ruling party's ability to challenge the Brotherhood in the next parliamentary

elections, as it did during the May-June presidential race. The declaration also prevents the courts from dissolving the Brotherhood-dominated constitution-writing body, which non-Islamists have abandoned en masse, all but ensuring a theocratic Egyptian future.

Perhaps more importantly, the constitutional declaration grants Morsi unprecedented executive authority. It holds that all of Morsi's laws and decrees since his June 30 inauguration "are final and binding" until a new constitution is drafted and new parliament is elected, and annuls all lawsuits against his edicts. In Orwellian language, it further grants Morsi the unlimited power to "take the necessary actions and measures to protect the country and the goals of the revolution."

Morsi's quick pivot from national security crisis to power grab is nothing new. In fact, he responded similarly to a major Sinai terrorist attack in August, which he used as a pretext to issue a constitutional declaration that claimed full executive, legislative, and constitutional-assembly-appointment authority. At the time, the Obama administration appeared hesitant to criticize Morsi, expressing its bland "hope that President Morsi's announcements will serve the interests of the Egyptian people."

But unlike in August, when Egyptians appeared confused by Morsi's maneuver, Egypt's non-Islamist opposition has responded to Morsi's latest act with immediate mass protests. Downtown Cairo is once again a teargas-saturated battleground, in which Egypt's notoriously violent security forces are confronting anguished activists. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood has mobilized in support of Morsi, who encouraged them on Friday by warning of "weevils eating away at the nation."

Despite these developments, however, Washington's outlook remains the same: It appears disinclined from pressing Morsi publicly on domestic matters, apparently still believing that this will achieve Morsi's cooperation on foreign policy. Thus the State Department's vanilla statement on Friday calling on "all Egyptians to resolve their differences...peacefully and through democratic dialogue."

Yet Morsi's constitutional declarations make "democratic dialogue" virtually impossible because they insulate him and the Muslim Brotherhood from all meaningful checks on their authority.

Moreover, Washington's soft approach towards the Muslim Brotherhood isn't moderating its violent ambitions. Witness, for example, Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie's statement on Thursday -- shortly after fighting concluded in Gaza -- that, "It's Muslims' duty to work to recover Palestine through all means and capabilities, first and foremost by preparing for force." Or the Brotherhood party's call last week for unilaterally amending the peace treaty with Israel. Or Brotherhood foreign relations official Mohamed Sudan's recent announcement that Morsi is "cancelling normalization with the Zionist entity gradually."

So rather than banking on the failed hope of Morsi's moderation, Washington must press Morsi to reverse course now. Specifically, it should use its economic aid and influence within the International Monetary Fund, from which Egypt is seeking a \$4.8 billion loan, as leverage for confronting Morsi with hard decisions that might lead him to moderate his behavior. Otherwise, Morsi will come away from the current crisis convinced -- yet again -- that he can build another Egyptian dictatorship without paying any price. And that raises the likelihood that he will turn his attention abroad once he consolidates his power at home.

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

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