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How to Send Egypt a Message

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Articles & Testimony

The Morsi government is encouraging anti-American unrest; the Obama administration must now send a clear signal back.

The image of a black Al Qaeda flag flying above the United States Embassy in Cairo on Sept. 11 shocked Americans. It should have shaken the Egyptian Government as well. Egypt receives \$1.5 billion annually from the U.S., and Washington is about to forgive \$1 billion in the ailing state's debt.

But Egypt's government is charting a different course. Rather than denouncing the egregious violation of U.S. sovereignty, Egypt's ruling party, the Muslim Brotherhood, is doubling down. This Friday, the Brotherhood is slated to hold a mass demonstration just two blocks from the U.S. compound in Cairo.

In Egypt and the U.S., the attack is widely being attributed to an obscure anti-Islamic movie. But in fact, Al Gamaa Al Islamiyya, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, announced weeks ago that it would protest in front of the U.S. Embassy on 9/11 to demand the release of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind cleric mastermind of the first World Trade Center Bombing in 1993.

No doubt, the appearance of the video led to a spike in support for the Gamaa demonstration, notably among Salafists and Egypt's infamously drugged-up soccer fans known as "Ultras."

So while the Brotherhood may not have planned the attack, the organization quickly embraced it, exploiting the crime to foment sectarian tensions and burnish its anti-American populist credentials. To wit, in its first official account of events in Arabic, the Brotherhood claimed that the anti-Islamic movie had been funded by Coptic Christians in America and praised Egyptians for "rising up for the victory of the Prophet."

A day later, the Muslim Brotherhood's Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi had not offered an apology to the U.S. Instead, according to the Egyptian daily *Al Ahrām*, Morsi directed the Egyptian Embassy in Washington to take legal action against the film's producers.

Morsi's reticence comes as little surprise. The Muslim Brotherhood has a history of antipathy toward the U.S. and its allies. Morsi himself is a well-documented 9/11 "truther" and, under his leadership, Egypt has made unprecedented diplomatic overtures to Iran.

But the attack on the Embassy went beyond the pale. For starters, it was preventable. A terrorist organization's calls for protests outside the Embassy should have prompted the deployment of additional Egyptian security forces. Morsi's abdication of responsibility and the Muslim Brotherhood's defense of the assault should be the last straw.

Washington should present President Morsi with a choice: Either abide by international norms or preside over an Egypt increasingly threatened by economic collapse. At present, Egypt's economy is tanking as instability and violence continue to scare away both tourists and investors.

To forestall a crisis, Washington committed to forgive that \$1 billion in debt, and it has ardently supported a pending \$4.8 billion International Monetary Fund loan. And just this week, the Embassy in Cairo sponsored a delegation of American businessmen in Cairo to encourage U.S. investment in an Egypt that was "open for business."

All of this should be put on hold. Washington can tolerate a lot, but it cannot invest in an Egypt that refuses at a minimum to secure American diplomats. So long as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Morsi Administration insist on encouraging Salafists and soccer hooligans to target U.S. interests, the U.S. can and should impose costs for this choice.

In addition to economic repercussions, there should be diplomatic consequences for Morsi's behavior. Absent unequivocal expressions of public remorse in Arabic, U.S. officials should refuse to meet with Morsi when he visits New York in late September for the United Nations General Assembly.

Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood have never been shy about expressing their feelings to the United States, whether about 9/11 conspiracy theories, or in advocating for the release of convicted terrorist Omar Abdel Rahman. Morsi's visit to the U.S. is an opportunity for Washington to deliver a similarly unvarnished message: Inciting potentially violent protests against the United States is the act of a rogue, not an ally.

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