

# 7 Ways America Can Get Its Mojo Back in Egypt

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**With its initial attempts at building bridges in Cairo having backfired, the Obama administration is looking for new ways to improve America's image in Egypt.**

**E**gypt's President Mohammed Morsy is trying to get down to business, but the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) isn't making things easy. The Muslim Brotherhood leader's newly appointed cabinet keeps holdovers from the previous cabinet in top positions, which suggests that the military junta is preventing Morsy from radically reshaping Egyptian policy, at least for the time being. Indeed, the power struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and SCAF continues to define Egypt's post-Mubarak transition -- and it could be years before either emerges victorious.

This is a messy political environment for the United States to try to improve its relationship with the Egyptian people, and it is not going well. Just last month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's motorcade was showered with rotten vegetables upon her visit to Egypt, and thousands-strong crowds protested her appearances in both Cairo and Alexandria.

Of course, anti-American sentiment in Egypt is nothing new. Ordinary Egyptians have long objected to various aspects of U.S. foreign policy, from Washington's support for Israel to its global counterterrorism campaigns, and former President Hosni Mubarak's regime stoked anti-Western anxieties to divert attention from its own misdeeds.

But the protests that confronted Clinton were new in one important sense: Christians and non-Islamists -- historically two of Egypt's most pro-American demographic groups -- organized them. And for this reason, U.S. policymakers fear that anti-American sentiment is not only worsening, but broadening beyond the Islamists and Arab nationalists who have traditionally opposed U.S. policy in Egypt. With its initial attempts at building bridges in Cairo having backfired, President Barack Obama's administration is looking for new ways to improve America's image in Egypt.

Here are seven ideas to get things started:

### **1. Engage non-Islamist parties**

One of the most visible changes in Washington's post-Mubarak policy has been its engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood. This shift was born of necessity: The Brotherhood's organizational strength made its political emergence practically inevitable, and Egypt's strategic importance meant that sidelining the Brotherhood was no longer a viable option.

Yet the administration's single-minded focus on building ties with the Brotherhood has alienated non-Islamist parties, which include members who were already wary of the United States due to its longtime support for Hosni Mubarak. "When any person of the USA comes to Egypt, they just visit the government, the SCAF, and only the Muslim Brotherhood," Basem Kamel, an Egyptian Social Democratic Party parliamentarian and former revolutionary youth activist, told me. "But they never ask to meet any of us."

Meanwhile, the speed with which the United States went from dodging the Brotherhood to working with it has fueled conspiracy theories that the United States has rigged Egyptian politics to facilitate the Brotherhood's rise. On the basis of these rumors, many non-Islamist parties participated in the July protests against Clinton's visit.

To be sure, conspiracy theories are an unfortunate reality in Egyptian politics, and there is little the United States can do to prevent them entirely. But by casting a wider net in engaging Egyptian political leaders, the administration can avoid the impression that it is playing favorites. And it makes little sense for the United States to turn its back on non-Islamist parties, especially those that are more favorably disposed toward U.S. interests and values than the historically anti-Western, theocratic Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood seems ascendant at the moment, and it is easy to imagine how it would remain Egypt's most powerful group for years to come. But Mubarak's sudden ouster last year should caution Washington against betting on any one party, no matter how dominant it may seem. Egypt's revolution is still percolating, and the best policy for Washington is using broad engagement to spread its risk.

### **2. Talk about the Camp David Accords as primarily an Egyptian interest, not as an American one.**

Egyptians' most common complaint about American foreign policy in the Middle East is that the United States is "biased" toward Israel, and that U.S. policy is aimed at keeping Israel strong and Arabs weak. They therefore view Egypt's peace treaty with Israel as something that was imposed on them for Israel's benefit -- a favor they were forced to do for the United States and Israel. This is why the Muslim Brotherhood has frequently sought excuses for ridding itself of the Camp David Accords, such as by proposing to put the accords to a referendum or accusing Israel of somehow violating the treaty.

Egyptian audiences need to be told very bluntly: The Camp David Accords are not primarily an American interest, but an Egyptian one. The treaty has prevented war between you and your much stronger neighbor for more than 30 years, and saved innumerable Egyptian lives. The treaty enabled Egypt to grow its economy after decades of conflict, and a breakdown in the treaty will prevent Egypt from getting the international investment it sorely needs. After all, what sane company will invest in a country that isn't firmly attached to a peace agreement with its much stronger neighbor? More importantly, if you break the treaty, the odds of Egyptians dying in renewed conflict rises considerably. That would be bad for American interests -- but you, Egyptians, will feel the pain first and foremost.

The key point should be that American support for Egyptian-Israeli peace has given Egypt a shot at a prosperous, stable future. Far from being an American imposition, it is an Egyptian life-saver.

### **3. Frame engagement with Islamists in terms of interests, not in terms of "supporting democracy."**

Washington's engagement with Islamists was, and remains, a pragmatic decision. Simply put, Islamists' political

victories made them necessary partners if the United States hoped to achieve its interests in Egypt -- though, to be sure, this remains a big "if."

Yet, rather than framing its policy in terms of narrow strategic interests, the Obama administration has occasionally dressed up its outreach to Islamists -- and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular -- as support for democracy. For example, during his visit to Egypt in January, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns repeatedly referred to the Muslim Brotherhood as a "democratic party that is committed to democratic principles." At other points, administration officials have explained this policy by portraying Islamists as progressives, such as intelligence chief James Clapper's comment in February 2011 that the Muslim Brotherhood is a "heterogenous" and "largely secular" organization.

The problem with these types of statements is that they are patently false. Islamists' call for establishing sharia as the source of all Egyptian legislation makes them theocratic -- not democratic, and certainly not secular. Brotherhood political leaders have been quite clear that they will brook no opposition in this regard. "It's not allowed for Christians to come and say that the sharia is wrong," Alexandria parliamentarian Saber Abouel Fotouh told me during a December interview. "They are not specialists."

Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood has demonstrated repeatedly in recent months that it is not dedicated to democratic principles. During the presidential run-off election, for instance, the Carter Center reported that the Brotherhood used its vast social services networks to buy votes. Prior to being disbanded in June, the Brotherhood-dominated parliament was investigating a non-Islamist parliamentarian for insulting SCAF chief Field Marshall Hussein Tantawi.

Unfortunately, Washington doesn't have the luxury of dealing exclusively with democrats, which is why it partnered with Mubarak for 30 years and will try to work with the Brotherhood now. But pretending that non-democratic leaders are otherwise makes the United States look gullible, and further convinces real Egyptian democrats that we have put all our eggs in the Brotherhood's basket. A better public diplomacy strategy would explain U.S. cooperation with Egypt's newly elected leaders in terms of mutual interests, but also communicate concerns about those new leaders' restrictive views on civil liberties.

We should further encourage non-Islamists to continue fighting for a more secular Egyptian future. This was, after all, a major theme of last year's Tahrir Square protests -- which the Islamists joined only belatedly.

#### **4. Speak out more forcefully for minority rights.**

One of the most alarming aspects of the protests that greeted Clinton's most recent visit to Cairo was the heavy presence of Christians demonstrators, as well as Coptic leaders' refusal to meet with her. After all, Egyptian Christians have historically been among the most pro-American communities in Egypt -- in part because of U.S. policy that had previously mostly sidelined Islamists, and in part due to America's Christian heritage.

Christian mistrust of Washington, however, emerged shortly after last year's revolt, when the Obama administration responded weakly to a wave of anti-Christian violence that included church burnings and sectarian clashes. By March 2011, frustration with Washington's silence was a common theme of Coptic demonstrations held at Egypt's state media headquarters in downtown Cairo. "Obama doesn't care about all of these horrible things that are happening to Christians," a protester told me at the time. "Obama only cares about Muslims. ... Bush was willing to defend Christians, but Obama won't say a word in our defense."

Christians' feelings of betrayal deepened in October, when the White House responded to a brutal military assault on the mostly Christian demonstrators outside the same state media building, which left 25 dead, by meekly calling for "restraint on all sides." And in the aftermath of successive Islamist electoral victories, the Obama administration's overwhelming focus on engaging the Muslim Brotherhood -- often at the expense of engaging other segments of

Egyptian society -- has deepened their alienation.

Given Washington's low popularity in Egypt, the United States can hardly afford to turn off one of the few historically pro-American communities. The Obama administration can begin winning Egyptian Christians back by speaking out more forcefully in support of minority rights. In this vein, the administration should argue that protecting minorities is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity, since Egypt is unlikely to attract much needed international investment if Egyptian Christians continue to flee the country. The administration must therefore communicate to the Brotherhood very clearly that, having won an election, it is now the Brotherhood's responsibility to make sure that Christians feel safe in their country, and that they will be judged accordingly.

The administration can also improve its relationship with Egyptian Christians by responding more aggressively to anti-Christian violence -- such as a recent episode in the village of Dahshur, in which a Muslim mob attacked a Christian launderer who accidentally burned a Muslim customer's shirt while ironing it, catalyzing strife that forced 120 Christian families to flee. At a minimum, the administration should issue strong public denunciations of these attacks, rather than falling back on flaccid calls for "restraint." The U.S. government might also consider sending emissaries to these communities -- and to the hospitals where injured Christians are being treated -- so as to communicate that Christian suffering in Egypt is not going unheard.

### **5. Talk loudly about the concrete benefits of U.S. aid to Egypt.**

Egyptians frequently complain that Washington uses Egypt as a geostrategic pawn, and that U.S. policy has therefore done little to address the needs of the Egyptian people. "America just looks out for its own interests," Ahmed Abdel Salam, a Muslim Brother, told me in Tahrir Square in June, shortly after Mohamed Morsi was elected Egypt's next president. "We wish they would deal with us as a country now."

But the fact is that U.S. policy has done a great deal to help Egyptians. American economic aid, which totals approximately \$250 million per year, has built schools, hospitals, roads, phone systems, and water treatment plants, among many other social services. Moreover, U.S.-brokered Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs), within which Egyptian companies are granted duty free access to U.S. markets so long as 10.5 percent of their components come from Israel, have been a boon for Egypt's economy. The QIZs employ approximately 150,000 Egyptians, account for one-third of all Egyptian exports, and earn Egypt nearly \$2.5 billion in annual revenue.

These are the tangible benefits of their relationship with the United States that Egyptians should know about -- and which American diplomats should not be shy about highlighting. Just as Egyptians know that the Cairo Opera House was built by the Japanese and the Metro was built by the French, they should know that many of their social institutions, as well as a key economic engine, came courtesy of the United States.

By emphasizing the extent to which U.S. aid to Egypt has benefited ordinary Egyptians, policymakers can communicate the true depths of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. Our partnership, they should say, is not only strategic, but societal.

### **6. The U.S. Embassy in Egypt needs an Arabic-language Twitter account, with an actual face attached to the handle.**

The U.S. Embassy in Egypt made a noble foray into social media when it established a Twitter account, @USEmbassyCairo, in September 2009. The account, which is managed by a member of the embassy's press office, serves three useful purposes: It publicizes American diplomatic news, responds to queries from other Twitter users about U.S. policy, and combats falsehoods about America's role in Egypt (such as, for example, the notion that the United States aided the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral victories).

There is, however, much room for improvement in the embassy's social media presence. First, the embassy's

English-only tweeting habit -- though occasionally interrupted by Arabic retweets -- substantially limits its outreach to the broader Egyptian public. It particularly undermines the embassy's efforts to address anti-American conspiracy theories that spread quickly among Arabic-language Twitter users, as well as in the Arabic-language press. The first step should be to open an Arabic-language account, which will allow the embassy to reach a far wider Egyptian audience than it does now.

Second, the embassy's Twitter usage would be more valuable if it attached a face to its Twitter handle, rather than simple tweeting as the institution itself. Online engagement is most effective when conducted by named individuals rather than brands or organizations, and the Twitter accounts of foreign governments are likely to feel especially inauthentic. Putting an actual diplomat's name on the embassy's Twitter account would make its tweets seem more personal, and enhance the embassy's ability to connect with Egyptian web users.

## 7. Don't over-obsess about America's image in Egypt.

Policymakers are right to be concerned about America's image in Egypt. While Egypt's revolution is ongoing, the uprising has already produced a more open political culture that has made Egyptian public opinion more influential than ever before. But U.S. officials should also be cognizant about the limits of what public diplomacy can achieve.

Anti-Americanism has deep roots within Egyptian political culture, and -- even more than a year and a half after Mubarak's ouster -- it still features prominently in the state-run press. Moreover, the Egyptian public's disagreements with Washington on many matters cannot be papered over by even the most savvy public relations campaign.

For this reason, the rule of thumb of U.S. public diplomacy in Egypt should be "do no harm." If diplomats can avoid alienating our allies within Egypt and explain the benefits of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship, they can at least prevent America's unpopularity from growing.

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