

# How the U.S. Should Handle the Islamist Rise in Egypt

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Articles & Testimony

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**Washington's message to Cairo's emerging leaders should be that U.S. support is conditional on their cooperation in maintaining peace with Israel and preserving political pluralism and religious and minority rights.**

**F**rom an American perspective, the situation in Egypt is a nightmare. One year after Tahrir Square triumphantly toppled a tyrant, Islamists are poised to profit from Egyptian "people power."

They, not liberals or secularists, proved nimble at the electoral process, with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the even more fundamentalist Nour Party winning about two-thirds of the seats in Egypt's next parliament. While both parties have paid lip service to respecting Egypt's international obligations, American leaders cannot ignore the fact that the security partnership Washington had with Cairo for more than 30 years is in serious jeopardy.

Some have sugar-coated the Islamists' ascendance by arguing that the responsibility of governance will moderate them. Experience suggests otherwise. Islamist governments in Iran, Sudan and Gaza have proved resilient and uncompromising against massive international pressure, none of which Egypt is likely to face anytime soon. And Turkey -- the model du jour -- went through a generation of military-supervised rule before its Islamists, twice banished from politics by the generals, finally found a formula for governance.

Others point out that if the U.S. has built close security relationships with most conservative Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, then surely a Muslim Brotherhood-led Egypt can be friendly, too. But Egypt is very different. Its Islamist narrative is of fighting to survive against the iron fist of a corrupt, American-backed autocrat.

Anti-Americanism -- along with anti-Westernism and anti-Israelism -- is deeply embedded in the DNA of Egyptian Islamist groups.

Still others pin their hopes on the very democratic process that is now empowering the Islamists. Play the long game, they advise -- help build non-Islamist political alternatives that can compete when Egyptians vote in their second or third elections. This approach has merit, but only if the Islamists don't in the meantime take steps to prevent any real competition in the future, such as convincing the country's Coptic minority -- roughly 10%-15% of the population -- that it has no future in an Islamist Egypt. Non-Islamists stand no chance of electoral success if there is a Coptic exodus.

But enough with theoretical arguments. Islamists' words and actions over the previous few months speak for themselves, and they suggest that key U.S. interests are likely to suffer.

First, Muslim Brotherhood leaders have vowed to put Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel to a popular referendum - a strategy that they believe will let them sink the treaty without being blamed for doing so. That the group would work so deviously to undo a document that has prevented war for over three decades demonstrates the organization's preference for radicalism over realism.

Second, a Muslim Brotherhood-governed Egypt appears inclined toward fueling, rather than countering, violent extremism. In this vein, the Brotherhood's invitation for al-Gama'a al-Islamiya to join its coalition, even if rejected, should be a source of grave concern. Al-Gama'a is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and one of its top priorities is demanding that Washington release Omar Abdel Rahman, the "Blind Sheikh" implicated in the 1993 World Trade Center attack.

Third, an Islamist-led Egypt will be inhospitable for religious minorities and Egyptian secularists. Newly elected Islamist parliamentarians aim to make Shariah the exclusive, not just the main, source for Egyptian legislation -- and they vow to prosecute those who criticize Islamic law. The recent case that Islamists have brought against Coptic billionaire Naguib Sawiris for tweeting a satirical image of Mickey and Minnie Mouse dressed as Salafists is a scary sign of things to come.

Yet Washington has assets to preserve its equities in Egypt. At \$1.2 billion, U.S. military assistance is essentially the procurement budget for the Egyptian armed forces. While the Islamists may want the military out of politics, they also don't want to be accused of materially weakening the country. Direct U.S. economic support is much smaller, at \$250 million, but America has a substantial voice in international financial institutions to which Egypt almost surely will turn for help. In the coming period, when Egypt's Islamist politicians will test just how far the U.S. will bend to accommodate a new political reality, the U.S. should be willing to use both these tools to advance its interests.

Washington's message to Cairo's emerging leaders should be that U.S. support -- both direct and indirect -- is conditional on their cooperation in maintaining peace with Israel and preserving political pluralism and religious and minority rights. America should determine its relationship based on what Egypt's new rulers actually do on these issues, not the cooing sounds that their English-language spokesmen offer visiting American journalists, diplomats and politicians.

Regarding Israel, simply not abrogating the peace treaty is not enough. The Egypt-Israel relationship has been stripped of so much content that there isn't much left to the peace treaty other than the absence of war. A more useful litmus test would be Egypt's commitment to invest the personnel and resources necessary to secure the Sinai Peninsula. Only such an effort will prevent the area from becoming, like Gaza in the 1950s and South Lebanon in the 1970s, a safe haven for terrorists that is likely to draw Egypt and Israel into eventual conflict.

Protecting political pluralism and religious and minority rights is trickier but no less important. Especially critical is protection for Copts, the canaries in Egypt's coal mine. The fate of Egypt's democracy -- and the chances for the

emergence of non-Islamist options -- will rest on whether this millennia-old community, as well as an array of other groups, feels comfortable in the new Egypt. A narrow focus on protecting pluralism and minority rights, rather than a broader and more diffuse effort to grow Egypt's democratic institutions, is easier to maintain, more conducive to a sticks-and-carrots assistance policy, and more likely to keep open future political alternatives.

Merely protecting Egypt-Israel security and defending pluralism and minority rights would be a far cry from the robust partnership of years past. But given the hand the U.S. has been dealt, this approach stands the best chance of preserving what matters most to long-term American interests.

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