

Insecure in Egypt

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

The sooner the governing military authorities understand that Egypt needs more security, not more money, the better the chance that the country will be able to reverse the current dynamic and start moving toward a more prosperous future.

It's been five months since the revolution that ended the 30-year tenure of Hosni Mubarak, but the upheaval in Egypt is far from over. Large protests have become routine, if not habitual, in Egypt. In late June, 1,000 civilians criticizing the slow pace of reform were injured in clashes with riot police in Cairo's Tahrir Square. More recently, on July 8 tens of thousands of Egyptians descended on the square in hopes of "sav[ing] the revolution."

Lately, the demonstrations have largely focused on demands for ancien regime accountability -- namely, to prosecute former regime officials more quickly and provide financial compensation to families of those killed during the revolution. But the rallies could just as easily focus on the deteriorating security situation, which seriously threatens the revolution.

While it might be tempting for Washington and the international community just to shovel more financial assistance at post-revolution Egypt, further cash infusions -- even if substantial -- will do little to improve the state's long-term outlook. Absent physical security, the prospects for sustaining economic growth and consolidating the revolution's democratic victories are bleak.

It's going to take a lot of work to reestablish security. During the revolution, Egypt's once omnipotent police and general security forces were discredited. Demonstrators overran headquarters as officers engaged in shred-fests to destroy paper trails and insulate themselves from future prosecution.

Underpaid and demoralized, Egypt's police forces have been significantly degraded. It's estimated that only 30 percent of the once ubiquitous black-uniformed officers remain on the job. Meanwhile, State Security -- the former regime's repressive apparatus and domestic counter-terrorism organization -- has lost much of its capacity, and its successor, the National Security Apparatus, is not yet up to speed.

Amidst and because of this security vacuum, Egypt is facing an economic crisis. Tourism has not yet rebounded from the revolution, contributing to a spike in unemployment, now officially at 12 percent. At the same time, the atmosphere of political and security uncertainty has considerably slowed foreign direct investment, leading to a - 4.2 percent growth rate this quarter, the first negative period in nearly a decade.

In May, with revenues down and foreign reserves plummeting, the state appeared to be sliding toward economic collapse. The international community responded with forty billion dollars in assistance commitments that shored up confidence and, at least temporarily, staved off worst-case scenarios. But Egypt is not out of the woods.

While food and fuel subsidies account for over 9 percent of the annual Egyptian budget, it's unclear whether even this substantial allocation will float the 40 percent of Egyptians who make \$2 a day. According to recent government of Egypt statistics, in the past 12 months, food prices on local diet staples have increased nearly 100 percent. In early June, during a one-week period alone, prices of rice, cooking oil, and meat rose up to 11 percent.

In January, in a last-ditch effort to placate protestors and remain in office, Mubarak authorized a 15 percent rise in public sector salaries. While significant, the increase will hardly keep pace with inflation, and will fall well short of the heightened post-revolution expectations of the Egyptian street.

The combination of economic stresses, a diminished security apparatus, and the flight of criminals from state jails during the revolution has, not surprisingly, resulted in a rising crime rate. Indeed, according to some estimates, criminal activity -- ranging from misdemeanors to felonies -- has increased up to 200 percent. Egyptians are concerned. In an Abu Dhabi Gallup poll released this past May, 39 percent of respondents said they "felt unsafe walking alone at night," up from 17 percent a year before.

Local newspapers paint a grim picture of the security situation. Handgun sales -- legal and otherwise -- are on the rise. Prices for AK-47 assault rifles are up, too. Theft is likewise becoming a more common occurrence. Telecom Egypt, for example, reported in May that \$5 million worth of telephone cable had been stolen over the past four months. The Egyptian press is also reporting with greater frequency on previously unheard of cases of kidnapping and gang rape.

Equally ominous have been the unprecedented reports of individual and commercial carjackings throughout Egypt. According to an interview with the head of a transportation association that appeared in the daily Yawm al-Saba' on May 9, in recent months, in addition to a high number of personal vehicles, 15 trucks carrying construction materials across Egypt were seized, resulting in a suspension in these shipments. The near absence of security on the roads, the interview continued, is also contributing to the crisis of food commodities.

Notwithstanding the increasingly troubling picture of developments in the once stable state, Egypt today does not resemble some post-apocalyptic Middle Eastern Mad Max landscape. But the trend lines are not promising, and will not improve without a real focus on security. What Egypt needs now is not more money, but more stability. The sooner the governing military authorities understand this, the better the chance that Egypt will be able to reverse the current dynamic and start moving toward a more prosperous future.

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