

Egypt, U.S. Strategy, and Engaging the Muslim Brotherhood

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Brief Analysis

In the absence of a well-articulated U.S. strategy, America's friends and adversaries will read outreach to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood as fumbling in the dark.

Secretary of State Clinton confirmed today that the Obama administration had authorized "limited contact" with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB). This is not, in fact, news. U.S. officials have engaged with MB members in the past, when the group's representatives served in parliament. The convenience of that political umbrella for contact with the MB disappeared last November, when the Mubarak regime's ham-fisted fixing of parliamentary elections resulted in no opposition candidates winning seats. Yet soon after Mubarak's fall, senior U.S. officials privately confirmed that policy had been changed to permit direct engagement with MB officials, though they were not advertising the shift.

What is more striking about Clinton's pronouncement is that it comes in the absence of a clear strategy to advance the prospect for a successful outcome to Egypt's tumultuous changes.

Privately, everyone in Washington recognizes that Cairo is the fulcrum of the so-called "Arab Spring." While there is much to gain from a successful, peaceful, and orderly transition to democracy in Egypt (just as there is much to gain from success in countries such as Syria), it is also the country where America has the most to lose. The country's fate will have a direct and immediate impact on core U.S. interests in the Middle East, from essential security needs such as Suez Canal access and the fight against weapons smuggling, to regional priorities such as Arab-Israeli peace and the need to counter Iranian regional ambitions. Most important, a reinvigorated Egypt may be poised to return as a major player on the interregional political, social, and cultural stage, with the direction of its revolutionary change serving as a powerful model for change elsewhere.

That private recognition has not been matched by public action, however. Although President Obama was a visible player in the Egypt story in January and February, when his public break with Mubarak was a significant factor in the regime's breathtaking collapse, Washington has receded into the background ever since. In May, before and

during the G8 summit, Egypt appeared to have the administration's attention again, but the moment passed quickly -- a combination of the president's distracting choice to focus on Israeli-Palestinian matters, the less-than-meets-the-eye economic plan rolled out by the administration and its G8 partners, and the speed and urgency of events elsewhere.

This is a case, however, where focusing on the urgent risks sidelining the important. As evidenced not least by the current turmoil on the streets of Cairo, there is enormous uncertainty about the direction of change in Egypt at the moment, a process that Washington can admittedly affect only at the margins. Even so, the administration should do what it can to advance the prospects for positive change. This includes:

- articulating more clearly -- to the Egyptian people, the Egyptian government, and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces -- the sort of Egypt with which the United States hopes to have a lasting, mutually beneficial partnership (i.e., one that respects freedom, liberty, and human rights at home and security and peace abroad) and the pathway Washington believes will most likely lead to that outcome (i.e., a more deliberative schedule of elections than the one currently in place);
- recognizing that there is no contradiction between investing in a process of democratic choice (i.e., presidential and parliamentary elections, constitutional reform) and not being indifferent to the outcome of that process (i.e., finding ways to support, through words and deeds, leaders and parties that share U.S. values and interests);
- engaging with other key actors -- such as potential international donors and congressional leaders -- to enhance their potentially helpful contributions and limit their negative ones (e.g., urging Arab states to lend financial support while cautioning Congress against preemptive punitive measures that may have the unintended effect of strengthening Islamist electoral prospects).

Of course, Washington must take care to ensure that the focus remains on the pace and content of change in Egypt, and that U.S. efforts do not themselves become the headline. Finding this balance will be no easy feat, but too much caution is no virtue -- it can result in Washington not being "in the game" at a moment when its presence and actions could be critical to the outcome.

In the context of a well-articulated strategy to advance U.S. interests in Egypt, a decision about engaging with the Muslim Brotherhood -- a political force whose success would clearly be inimical to U.S. interests -- is a below-the-fold news story. But in the absence of such a strategy, America's friends and adversaries will read outreach to the MB as fumbling in the dark.

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