

The National Interest

Egypt: Balancing Interests Over Values



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The bloody events in Egypt have placed American policymakers precisely where they least like to be—torn between American strategic interests and ideals. Reconciling the exigencies of *realpolitik* with support for democracy and human rights has always proven difficult.

That is why Saudi Arabia, a nation antithetical to everything America stands for, is a close ally that the United States has even gone to war to protect. That is why Jordan, led by a moderate despot, is currently the U.S. darling in the Arab world. That is why President Obama has remained impassive despite the slaughter of over one hundred thousand people in Syria, including repeated uses of chemical weapons, but has been more involved in Egypt in which "just" one thousand people have been killed since the military ousted President Morsi.

Part of the problem lies in the misperception, trumpeted by leading American media and some political leaders, that Egypt was undergoing a "transition to democracy" following President Mubarak's overthrow in 2011. True, Morsi was elected in his country's first free elections, but Egypt, under the thrall of the Muslim Brotherhood, was undergoing democratization only in the sense that Germany was after free elections gave rise to the Nazis in 1932, the mullahs in Iran in 1979, or Hamas in Gaza in 2006. It is not by chance that the liberal camp in Egypt strongly supported the military's ouster of Morsi and the harsh measures adopted since then to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentally anti-democratic organization.

To become a Brother is not like registering for the Republican or Democratic parties. The aspiring member undergoes an exhaustive vetting process that can take eight years, in which his total devotion to the Brotherhood is intensely scrutinized. The aspirant will be first inducted into a local neighborhood cell, to which he must devote a considerable portion of his time, faithfully carrying out organizational duties, and which will assess every aspect of his life, both party-related and private, in minute detail. Over the years, the successful aspirant will join successively broader cells which will continue screening his complete ideological purity and commitment. Rather than a political party, it is more like an underground movement.

It is also rabidly anti-American, fundamentally opposed to the values of freedom and pluralism that most Americans cherish, and blatantly anti-Semitic. That the first targets attacked by Muslim Brotherhood supporters in recent days included tens of Christian sites and museums is indicative.

The United States has major strategic interests in Egypt, the Arab country with the largest population and traditionally the leader of the Arab world. It needs a stable Egypt that will remain the head of a moderate, pro-American Arab camp, a force for moderation and stability in a vital region. Without Egypt, there is no pro-American Arab “camp,” and the United States will have a far harder time promoting its interests in this vital region and building Arab coalitions during future crises. Maintaining Egypt's peace with Israel is a bedrock of stability and American interests in the region and will have a significant impact on the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian progress. Military cooperation with Egypt, such as uninhibited overflights and naval passage through the Suez Canal, is also important. No Arab country can replace Egypt's pivotal role. The United States also has an interest in promoting democracy throughout the world.

Obama made two egregious errors in his treatment of Egypt since events there began unfolding in 2011. He abandoned Mubarak too rapidly, at a time when the regime might still have been saved, although Obama had no other choice

shortly thereafter when his demise became inevitable and defending him would have placed the United States on the "wrong side of history." Not for the first time, the United States turned on one of its friends, a moderate dictator, but not infinitely more heinous ones, to its own disadvantage. Second, Obama continued "business as usual" following the Muslim Brotherhood's election, even when it became clear just how antidemocratic the Morsi government was.

He may now be making a third major error, strongly condemning the measures taken by the new military regime, suspending delivery of F-16s and a major joint military exercise, and indicating that further measures may be in the offing (suspension of the \$1.5 billion in annual U.S. aid is the only major leverage left), while concomitantly acquiescing to the regime's actions in the hopes of preserving the basic relationship. This middle-of-the-road approach has succeeded only in gaining opprobrium from all sides in Egypt, strongly alienating the military regime and risking a rift.

Obama has a few primary options. One is to stand firmly behind American values, as advocated by recent editorials in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and adopt the calls by senators McCain and Graham to suspend all aid. For all the billions in aid over the decades, however, the United States now finds itself with little leverage in Egypt, and by alienating the regime it risks being left with none. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE are already rushing in to fill the diplomatic and economic vacuum, and ultimately Russia will provide weapons without any conditions. The Carter administration's principled stand when facing a similar situation with the Shah of Iran in 1979 has led to an ongoing nightmare. Not quite the outcomes Washington seeks.

A second option is to unequivocally prioritize strategic interest over normative considerations and back the regime unreservedly; If America can be a strategic ally of the Saudi regime, it can support the new Egyptian regime too. This option may no longer be viable, however, given the administration's approach

towards the events in Egypt to date and the fact that Egypt does not have that one overriding value-balancer, oil.

A third option is Obama's above-mentioned middle-of-the-road approach. The problem is that this option may very soon prove untenable in the face of the ongoing bloodshed in Egypt, rising public opposition in the United States, the president's own mixed emotions and the fury of the Egyptian regime.

Let's be honest. The prospects of Egypt becoming a democracy in any true sense of the word are minimal for a long time to come. Millions of Egyptians have taken to the streets demanding freedom and democratization and they are worthy of our admiration and support, but they are a small part of Egypt's vast population, and the country as a whole probably lacks the necessary prerequisites. It may, however, very well become an extremist Islamic state, devolve into a chaotic and radical failed state, or revert to complete military dictatorship, all unsavory possibilities. It also faces a clear danger of economic meltdown, regardless of political developments.

There is another possibility. Given time and cautious American encouragement, but not undue pressure for haste, Egypt may also become a semidemocratic state, in which the military continues to play a central role and in which there will be some limitations on freedoms. This is probably the best Washington can realistically hope for. Paradoxically, the greatest hope for this kind of a semidemocratic, stable, moderate, economically viable and pro-American Egypt, at peace with Israel, is for the military to successfully put down the Muslim Brotherhood counter-rebellion and reassert its authority. At the same time, as illegitimate as the Brotherhood is as an organization, it does represent a legitimate, if unfortunate, trend within Egyptian society that cannot be ignored or stamped out, and that must be given some voice. Things have changed in Egypt in the last two years. The people have tasted freedom and power and will not tolerate a reversion to simple military rule.

What is needed, therefore, is for the United States to make clear to the new regime how strongly it values the relationship and temporarily acquiesce to measures that it otherwise finds repugnant. At the same time, American support should be contingent on a gradual reversion to civilian rule and measured adoption of a more liberal constitution, steps to which the military is already committed. U.S. and domestic Egyptian pressures for overly rapid democratization were among the primary reasons for the failures to date.

Israel has a particular interest in Egypt's course. Had the Muslim Brotherhood remained in power, it is likely that it would have abrogated the peace treaty within a matter of years. Worse, it might ultimately have even rejoined the war camp, whether out of conscious design, or more likely, at least for the foreseeable future, due to an inability to withstand public pressure to act and its own natural inclinations following some regional conflagration, such as a future round between Israel and Hamas or Hezbollah. The Egyptian military, fully cognizant of the consequences of further warfare with Israel, will not be drawn in.

In 1979 I was a young officer in the Israel Defense Forces assigned to a joint commission with the Egyptian military which was responsible for implementing the recently signed peace treaty. For decades Egypt, like all other Arab countries, had maintained a policy of total hostility towards Israel, banning any contact whatsoever, and both sides had previously viewed each other only through their gun sights. Now, I was among the first Israelis to ever meet an Egyptian in a noncombat situation. It was a transformative experience I will never forget. The frigid first meetings, even during breaks, when no one mingled, then the thaw, the first acts of kindness and jokes, finally a friendly working relationship. The thought of an end to the peace with Egypt is a nightmare. Been there, done that.

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