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Pitfalls in Egypt

Gregory Aftandilian

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ABSTRACT: The US embrace of President Morsi tended to neglect his authoritarian and pro-Muslim Brotherhood policies, angering secular-liberal Egyptians. When the military ousted Morsi with the support of the latter, US officials tried to steer a middle course, but wound up alienating both sides of the divide. This article recommends that the US should continue to use its aid to encourage the new regime to meet its democratic benchmarks and curb its excesses.

The 3 July 2013 ouster of Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi by the Egyptian military put the United States in a quandary. The White House did not wish to endorse a military “coup,” which would make a mockery of US democratization policy and alienate the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s most powerful political organization from which Morsi hailed. US policymakers also did not wish to alienate either the Egyptian military, which it had cultivated and supported for more than three decades, or the country’s liberal establishment, which supported the removal of Morsi. American policy vacillated between tacit support and criticism of the new government, especially after its crack-down on Morsi supporters in mid-August, but did not fundamentally change as Washington tried to preserve its equities in Egypt amidst its low standing in the country. In many respects, this most recent episode was symptomatic of US policy toward Egypt since the 2011 revolution and reflects conflicting US policy goals in the Arab world’s most populous country. Before examining US policy since Morsi’s ouster, it is important to understand why the United States had become so controversial in Egypt before the events of 3 July.

The Morsi Presidency

After Mohamed Morsi was sworn in as president on 30 June 2012, he was visited in July by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, in an effort to show support and ensure the bilateral relationship would continue under his leadership. Prior to these visits, the leader of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Defense Minister Hussein Tantawi, stated: “Egypt will never fall to a certain group . . . the armed forces will not allow it.”¹ However, Secretary Clinton, right after meeting with Morsi and right before meeting with Tantawi, stated the United States supported Egypt’s “full transition to civilian rule” and the return of the military to a “purely national security role.”²

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1 Hamza Hendawi, “Egypt’s Top General Signals Military Won’t Give Free Rein to Brotherhood,” *The Washington Post*, July 16, 2012.

2 Stephanie McCrummon and Steve Hendrix, “In Cairo Clinton Says US Backs Civilian Rule in Egypt,” *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2012.

Morsi then used the occasion of a security incident in the Sinai—the killing of some 16 Egyptian soldiers by extremists on 5 August 2012—to undertake a major restructure of armed forces' leadership. After firing the head of the intelligence service as well as the chiefs of the navy, air force, and air defense command, Morsi forced the two top SCAF officials, Tantawi and army chief of staff Sami Anan, to retire.³ He picked General Abdel Fatah Al-Sissi, a younger member of the SCAF and head of military intelligence, to be the new Defense Minister. Al-Sissi evidently reached an accord with Morsi of some sort, and the military essentially “returned to the barracks,” but probably with the understanding that the new president would not take any further actions against the military. The White House was not alarmed by Morsi's actions because Al-Sissi was well-known to the US military (having studied at the United States Army War College) and official policy was for the Egyptian military to return to the barracks.⁴

Morsi's moves against the SCAF's old guard were welcomed by many of Egypt's young revolutionaries and liberals.⁵ However, his other moves were more controversial. He assumed both presidential and legislative powers and took action against some of his media critics. The Shura Council (the upper body of the parliament) replaced the editors of the government-owned newspapers with pro-Brotherhood figures. Many observers believed Morsi was personally involved in this decision.⁶

In November 2012, a new flare-up occurred between Hamas and Israel, which tested bilateral US-Egyptian relations. Although Morsi sent his prime minister to Gaza in a show of solidarity with Hamas, Egypt used its connections with both Hamas and Israel to defuse the situation. Morsi did not deal with the Israelis directly but instructed Egypt's diplomatic and security services to effect a truce between the two belligerents. For these actions, Morsi received praise from the United States, including a phone call from President Obama.⁷

Only a day after winning this international praise, Morsi undertook the most controversial decision of his presidency. On 22 November 2012, he issued a presidential decree declaring his decisions would no longer be subject to judicial review; in other words, he would be above the law. This action touched off a huge political firestorm in Egypt among his increasing number of liberal and secular detractors who were already suspicious of his motives. Demonstrations took place in many of Egypt's major cities, leading to clashes between Morsi's opponents and the police. The US reaction to Morsi's decree was muted, prompting widespread belief among Egyptian secular-liberals there was indeed a

3 Ernesto Landano, “Egypt Reacts With Respect to President's New Powers,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2012.

4 Essam al-Amin, “Egypt's Military Checkmated,” August 24-26, 2012, www.counterpunch.org/2012/08/24/egyptian-military-checkmated/; David Kirkpatrick, “In Paper, Chief of Egypt's Army Criticized US,” *The New York Times*, August 16, 2012.

5 Quote in Landano, “Egypt Reacts with Respect to President's New Powers,” August 14, 2012.

6 “Journalists Continue to Protest Against Chief Editors,” *Egypt Independent*, August 15, 2012.

7 Peter Baker and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Egypt's President and Obama Forge Link in Gaza Deal,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/22/world/middleeast/egypt-leader-and-obama-forge-link-in-gaza-deal.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Brotherhood-US conspiracy, and the United States only cared about the strategic aspect of the relationship and not democracy.⁸

Although Morsi eventually rescinded most of his controversial 22 November decree, he quickly moved ahead to put the new draft constitution, written primarily by his Brotherhood allies, to the public for a referendum. Secular-liberals objected to several articles in the constitution that appeared to place religion above individual rights, and some articles were so vaguely written as to leave them open to the Brotherhood's narrow interpretation. Many Egyptians outside the Brotherhood believed Morsi and the Brotherhood were intent on creating a theocracy as opposed to a civil state. Violent clashes erupted in many Egyptian cities against Morsi and the Brotherhood, and numerous Brotherhood offices were attacked and burned. Adding fuel to the fire, Morsi denigrated the protestors as "thugs" and "holdovers from the Mubarak regime," and he used the police to arrest many of his critics. Reports surfaced of the use of torture.⁹

Meanwhile, several liberal and leftist parties and personalities formed the National Salvation Front in an effort to bring more unity to the opposition and compel Morsi to bring it into the government. Morsi only offered a "dialogue" with this group while he focused his attention on ensuring a Brotherhood victory in the parliamentary elections (then slated for April 2013). Shortly thereafter, the National Salvation Front decided on a strategy of street protests that eventually morphed into the Tamarod (rebel) movement (a petition drive against Morsi). The Brotherhood responded by asking the Shura Council to come up with new laws to allow the security forces to "control protests and confront thuggery."¹⁰

When John Kerry became Secretary of State in early 2013, there was a slight shift in the US approach toward Morsi. Kerry was cognizant that US support for Morsi had alienated nearly the entire Egyptian liberal intelligentsia. For example, in early February 2013, a prominent Egyptian human rights activist, Baheiddin Hassan, wrote an open letter to President Obama in which he accused the American president of giving cover to the Morsi regime and "allowing it to fearlessly implement undemocratic policies and commit numerous acts of repression."¹¹

Although Kerry stated publicly in early March 2013 upon his arrival in Cairo, "I come here on behalf of President Obama, committed not to any party, not to any one person, not to any specific political point of view," his attempt to reach out to the opposition was highly controversial because of the lingering perception that the United States still

8 Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, and Ken Sofer, "Advancing US Interests and Values at a Time of Change in Egypt," *Center for American Progress*, January 31, 2013, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2013/01/31/51435/advancing-u-s-interests-and-values-at-a-time-of-change-in-egypt/>

9 Ramy Francis, Reza Sayah, and Laura Smith-Spark, "Scores Injured in Cairo Clashes as Crowds Mark Egypt's Protest Anniversary," *CNN.com*, January 25, 2013; Paul Talyor, "US Concerned at 'Climate of Impunity' in Egypt," *Reuters*, February 12, 2013; "Morsi Says 'Counter-revolution' is Obstructing Egypt's Development," *abramonline*, January 24, 2013; "Torture and Impunity Continue in Egypt: Amnesty International," *abramonline*, May 24, 2013.

10 "Egypt's Opposition Says Mursi Responsible for Violence," *Al Arabyya*, February 1, 2013; Gamal Essam El-Din, "Shura Council Discusses Laws to 'Control Protests and Confront Thuggery,'" *abramonline*, February 3, 2013.

11 Baheiddin Hassan, "Open Letter to President Obama," *Al-Abram Weekly*, February 6, 2013 <http://weekly.abram.org/News/1328/21/Open-letter-to-President-Obama.aspx>

avored Morsi and the Brotherhood.¹² Indicative of this tension, some leading oppositionists declined to meet with him and Kerry expressed frustration that Egypt's economy was unlikely to move forward in the absence of a political agreement between the opposing sides.¹³ After meeting with Morsi, he announced the United States would release \$250 million for Egypt in return for Egypt undertaking economic reforms and negotiating a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁴ Although most of this US aid was for an "entrepreneurial fund" to help young Egyptians, it had the unintended effect of diminishing Kerry's message that the Morsi government should adhere to democratic principles. The Egyptian liberal intelligentsia focused on the \$250 million figure, seeing it as a gift to Morsi.¹⁵

With seemingly mixed messages coming from Washington, and with the opposition looking weak in advance of the parliamentary elections, Morsi decided to take on Egypt's judges, which he saw as not only secular-liberals but Mubarak-era appointees. The courts were a thorn in the Brotherhood's side because they had declared in 2012 that the lower house of parliament as well as the original constituent assembly (both dominated by the Brotherhood) charged to draft Egypt's new constitution, were invalid and ordered them disbanded. Morsi wanted to lower the mandatory retirement age of judges from 70 to 60, which would have resulted in the dismissal of approximately 20 percent of them, allowing him to appoint Brotherhood lawyers to the bench.¹⁶ This attempt was further proof in the eyes of Egyptian liberals that the Brotherhood was attempting to monopolize power.

With parliamentary elections postponed from April until October 2013, the Egyptian opposition put its energies behind the Tamarod petition that spring. The National Salvation Front backed this movement, with the hope it would collect more signatures (calling for early presidential elections) from the citizenry than the number of votes Morsi received in the June 2012 presidential election, thereby delegitimizing his presidency. Economic troubles—gasoline shortages and electricity outages—added to the public's anger at Morsi and the Brotherhood. Polls showed Morsi's popularity had eroded.¹⁷

It was against this backdrop that remarks by the US Ambassador to Egypt, Anne Patterson, became a lightning rod. On 18 June, she gave a speech in Cairo in which she tried to explain why the United States dealt with an Egyptian government dominated by the Brotherhood that so many Egyptians opposed. She stated the "United States would work with whoever won the elections that met international standards." She expressed skepticism that street protests would produce better results than elections, called on Egyptians to roll up their sleeves and work hard to join and build political parties because "there is no other way,"

12 Ann Gearan, "Kerry Pushes Egypt on Economy; Opposition Figures Keep Distance," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2013.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Michael R. Gordon, "Kerry Announces \$250 million in US Aid for Egypt," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2013.

15 Interviews with confidential sources, March 10, 2013.

16 "Draft judicial law violates constitution: Egypt Appeal Court," *abramonline*, May 15, 2013.

17 Ingy Hasseib, "Daily Power Cuts Spark New Anger at Egypt's Government," *latimes.com*, May 29, 2013; "Support for Egypt Brotherhood and Morsi Dwindling: ZRS," *abramonline*, June 17, 2013

and added that chaos is a breeding ground for instability.¹⁸ Although Patterson was trying to set the record straight on US policy toward Egypt and to address conspiracy theories of a US-Brotherhood alliance, the speech had the opposite effect. Many liberal Egyptians saw the speech as a criticism of the Tamarod campaign and as giving the Morsi administration a free pass on human rights abuses. An opposition group, the National Association for Change, for example, accused Patterson of “blatant interference” in Egypt’s internal affairs.¹⁹

Frustrated by their inability to compel Morsi to change course, the opposition believed street demonstrations were its only recourse. When it was revealed that Patterson also held a two-hour meeting with a Brotherhood leader, Khairat al-Shater, who was not a government official, it fed opposition beliefs of US wrongdoing.²⁰ Actually, Patterson met with al-Shater to persuade him to convince Morsi to broaden his cabinet to include the opposition as a way of heading off strife in Egypt, but she did not make any progress on this issue.²¹ Unfortunately, just the fact that such a meeting with a high-ranking Brotherhood official occurred was “proof” of some nefarious US scheme. Patterson was not only vilified in the opposition press but crudely depicted on placards in anti-Morsi demonstrations. On 29 June, a Tamarod member charged “America and the Brotherhood have united to bring down the Egyptian people.”²²

In late June, the military entered the political fray. On 23 June, Al-Sissi warned “there is a state of division in society Prolonging it poses a danger to the Egyptian state . . . we will not remain silent as the country slips into a conflict that is hard to control.”²³ Al-Sissi also held a private meeting with Morsi, in which he reportedly urged the Egyptian president to compromise with the political opposition. Morsi responded by giving a televised speech on 26 June that, while acknowledging some mistakes, blamed the opposition for much of Egypt’s problems.²⁴ On 1 July, the day after millions of Egyptians started to demonstrate in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and elsewhere against Morsi, while pro-Morsi demonstrators congregated in other parts of the city, the military issued an ultimatum to Morsi and the opposition to seek a grand political compromise to bring stability to the country.²⁵ With Morsi not willing to budge, the military ousted him on 3 July and appointed Adly Mansour,

18 “Ambassador Anne W. Patterson’s Speech at the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies,” June 18, 2013, <http://egypt.usembassy.gov/pr061813a.html>

19 “Egypt Opposition Group Criticizes ‘Blatant Interference’ by US ambassador,” *abramonline*, June 19, 2013.

20 See the interesting piece by Dina Guirguis, “In Response to US Ambassador Anne Patterson,” *Atlantic Council*, June 27, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/in-response-to-us-ambassador-anne-patterson>

21 Michele Dunne, “With Morsi’s Ouster, Time for a New US Policy Toward Egypt,” *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/with-morsi-ouster-time-for-a-new-us-policy-towards-egypt/2013/07/04/8075f24e-e423-11e2-ae3f-339619eab080_story.html

22 Quoted in Abigail Hauslohner, “Egyptian Group Accuses US of Keeping Morsi in Power,” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2013.

23 Nasser Kamel trans. from As-Safir (Lebanon), “Egyptian Army Will Remain Neutral in June 30 Protests,” *al-monitor.com*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/06/egypt-army-neutral-june-30-demonstrations-morsi.html>

24 Abigail Hauslohner, “Defiant Morsi Defends Tenure as Nationwide Protests Near,” *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2013.

25 “Full Text of Egyptian Military Ultimatum,” *The Times of Israel*, July 1, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-egyptian-military-ultimatum/>

the head of the supreme constitutional court, as the interim president. In a televised news conference that evening, Al-Sissi said the military had no interest in running the country and had removed Morsi because he had failed to fulfill “the hope for a national consensus.”²⁶

Since Morsi’s Removal

The initial US reaction to Morsi’s ouster was measured, as Washington assessed the situation. President Obama met with his national security team, while Secretary Kerry called some Egyptian officials to urge them to restore democracy. The Obama administration was careful not to call Morsi’s ouster a “coup” because that would have triggered an automatic cutoff of US aid to Egypt under existing legislation. A White House spokesperson underscored the “importance of a quick and responsible return of full authority to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible.”²⁷ President Obama said after Morsi’s removal on 3 July that the United States would “not support particular individuals or political parties.” He then acknowledged the “legitimate grievances of the Egyptian people” while also observing that Morsi had won the presidency in a legitimate election. Obama added: “We believe that ultimately the future of Egypt can only be determined by the Egyptian people Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned by the decision of the armed forces to remove President Morsi and suspend the Egyptian constitution.”²⁸

The United States was trying to balance its stated policy goals with its strategic and political interests. Having dealt with Morsi as a legitimate president, based on the fact he was elected in what was deemed a free and fair election, it was difficult for the Obama administration to abandon him and endorse his removal by the military, as that would fly in the face of US democratization policy and subject the United States to criticism that it only supported democracy for non-Islamist groups. Moreover, having courted the Muslim Brotherhood for more than two years because it was the largest and best organized of Egypt’s political parties, the United States ran the risk of alienating this important constituency. On the other hand, with millions of Egyptians opposing Morsi and welcoming the military’s intervention that ousted him, the US administration ran the risk of alienating an even larger group of citizens if it did not appear supportive of what took place. Furthermore, the Egyptian military, with which the United States had developed long-standing and deep relations for more than three decades, was clearly supportive of Al-Sissi’s ouster of Morsi, and alienating this institution might have serious consequences for US-Egyptian strategic ties.

Amidst these conflicting interests was the ongoing impasse on the streets of Cairo. The Muslim Brotherhood staged two large protest encampments—one in Nasr City and another near Cairo University—that included women and children. In the meantime, the interim government arrested several Brotherhood leaders, including Khairat al-Shater. Some Brotherhood members spoke of their desire for martyrdom and said they would not leave these protests until their legitimate

²⁶ David Kirkpatrick and Alan Cowell, “Muslim Brotherhood’s Leaders Seized in Egypt,” *Boston Globe*, July 5, 2013.

²⁷ John Lederman, “US Officials Decline to Take Sides in Conflict,” *Boston Globe*, July 5, 2013.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

president (Morsi) was restored to office. On 8 July, the situation on the ground grew tenser as more than 50 Brotherhood protestors were killed in front of a military building in Cairo where they had gathered in response to rumors that Morsi was being held there. The military said the protestors fired first and one soldier was killed and 42 injured, while the Brotherhood claimed their supporters were killed indiscriminately by the military.²⁹ In the aftermath of this incident, some in the Tamarod campaign urged the authorities to ban the Brotherhood altogether.³⁰ In this highly-charged atmosphere, US officials urged restraint on both sides. Secretary of State Kerry spoke frequently with interim vice president Mohammed El-Baradei and interim foreign minister Nabil Fahmy while Secretary of Defense Hagel spoke regularly with Al-Sissi.³¹ The US message was to urge the authorities in Cairo not to use force and to create an inclusive government. El-Baradei and the new interim prime minister Hamza El-Beblawi, a prominent liberal economist, both urged the Brotherhood to enter into negotiations for a coalition government but the Brotherhood's bottom line was that Morsi should be reinstated first as president, a non-starter for the new government.³²

While still not calling Morsi's ouster a coup, the United States joined the European Union (EU) in calling for Morsi to be released from custody.³³ In early August a number of US and European officials, including Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, came to Egypt to seek a political compromise between the authorities and the Brotherhood. Two prominent Republican Senators, John McCain and Lindsay Graham, also traveled to Cairo at the behest of the White House, to urge restraint and to argue for an inclusive government. Though McCain and Graham had called Morsi's ouster a "coup," they had voted with a majority of Senators to oppose an amendment that would have cut off all aid to Egypt.³⁴ These mediation attempts by US and European officials, however, did not make any progress.

Throughout the initial period after Morsi's ouster, the Obama administration decided not to change the US assistance programs to Egypt, and in late July decided not to make a determination of whether a "coup" had occurred in Egypt.³⁵ The most it did was delay the delivery of F-16 jets to the Egyptian military, probably as a lever to ensure the interim government would abide by its timetable on elections. But even this small slap on the wrist was criticized by the Egyptian military. In

29 William Booth, Michael Birnbaum, and Abigail Hauslohner, "Egypt's Military Shoots Protestors," *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2013.

30 David Kirkpatrick, "Egypt's Liberals Embrace the Military, Brooking No Dissent," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2013.

31 In his *Washington Post* interview in early August, Al-Sissi said he spoke to US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel "almost every day" since the events of July 3. See Lally Weymouth, "Harsh Words for US from Egypt," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2013.

32 Lally Weymouth, "An Interview with Mohamed ElBaradei, Who Hopes for Reconciliation in Egypt," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-02/opinions/40983074_1_muslim-brotherhood-army-president-mohamed-morsi

33 "State Department Calls for Morsi Release," *CNN.com*, July 13, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/12/world/meast/egypt-coup>

34 John McCain and Lindsey Graham, "How Democracy Can Win in Egypt," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2013.

35 White House Press Secretary Jay Carney stated on July 8, 2013: "I think it would not be in the best interest of the United States to immediately change our assistance programs to Egypt," as quoted in *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2013.

an interview in *The Washington Post*, published on 5 August 2013, Al-Sissi said the F-16 delay “is not the way to treat a patriotic military.” He also said the United States had “turned its back on the Egyptians, and they won’t forget that.”³⁶ Al-Sissi’s tough words were undoubtedly genuine, but he was also buoyed by the fact that several Gulf Arab countries had given Egypt some \$12 billion in emergency funds.

At the same time, by not calling the 3 July ouster a coup, the United States was criticized by the Muslim Brotherhood for supposedly giving the Egyptian military a “green light” to remove Morsi.³⁷ When Secretary Kerry, during a press conference in Pakistan on 1 August, said the Egyptian military had acted to “restore democracy” when it ousted Morsi, he was denounced by the Brotherhood and other Islamist parties in the region. Kerry soon backpedaled from this statement, saying that all parties, the military and the pro-Morsi demonstrators, needed to work toward a peaceful and inclusive political resolution of the crisis.³⁸

On 14 August, the Egyptian military, spurred on by many Egyptian liberals, ordered the security forces to violently breakup the pro-Morsi protest encampments, believing these demonstrators had been given ample time to leave and their continued presence hindered implementation of Egypt’s political roadmap as well as efforts to restart Egypt’s economy. At least 500 protestors and 42 policemen were killed in the initial confrontation and hundreds more protestors were killed in subsequent days, accompanied by the arrests of many Brotherhood leaders.³⁹ Both Secretary Kerry and President Obama called this crackdown deplorable, and President Obama ordered the cancellation of the joint Bright Star military exercises scheduled to occur in late September. The US President also suggested that further steps could be taken against the Egyptian military, but he did not order the suspension or cutoff of aid, and he implicitly acknowledged that the situation was complicated. He stated that although Morsi had been elected democratically, a majority of Egyptians had become opposed to Morsi’s rule because his government “was not inclusive and did not respect the views of all Egyptians.”⁴⁰ Subsequently, the Obama administration ordered a review of US aid to Egypt including the delivery of helicopters for the Egyptian military.⁴¹ The Obama administration believed it had to do something in the face of such high numbers of civilian deaths to send a signal of its dissatisfaction with the Egyptian military’s actions but not so much as to burn its bridges to the authorities in Cairo.

36 Weymouth’s Interview with Al-Sissi, August 4, 2013.

37 Jason M. Breslow, “Who’s Who in Egypt’s Widening Political Divide?” PBS.org July 17, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/revolution-in-cairo-foreign-affairs-defense/whos-who-in-egypts-widening-political-divide-2/>

38 “Muslim Brotherhood Criticizes Kerry’s Endorsement of Mursi’s Overthrow,” Reuters, August 1, 2013; Deb Riechmann, “Kerry Backpedals on Controversial Comment on Egypt,” Associated Press, August 2, 2013.

39 Liz Sly and Sharaf al-Hourani, “Egypt Authorizes Use of Live Ammunition Against pro-Morsi Protestors,” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-15/world/41412007_1_mohamed-morsi-muslim-brotherhood-rabaa

40 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt,” August 15, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/15/remarks-president-situation-egypt>

41 Julian Barnes and Dion Nissenbaum, “US Weighs Military Aid to Egypt Item by Item,” *The Wall St. Journal*, August 20, 2013

A Way Ahead for US Policy

The United States' standing in Egypt is at a low point. Indicative of this dearth of influence, Al-Sissi clearly ignored repeated American calls about the need to exercise restraint and ordered the crackdown on the pro-Morsi demonstrators and the imposition of emergency laws. Most of Egypt's liberals are backing the Egyptian military and believe the United States does not understand the "threat" posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. The prevailing sentiment among this faction is that if the United States is upset with Egypt's new direction, then so be it—Egyptians (by which they mean the non-Brotherhood citizens)—must decide for themselves how best to protect their society. The other faction—primarily supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood—see US policy toward Egypt as a replication of policy during the Mubarak era—backing the security forces regardless of human rights abuses and against the interests of "genuine" democracy. The key questions are: How does the United States recover from this situation? Which policies should it pursue? Can it realistically maneuver in this highly polarized political environment to preserve its interests?

First, US officials must understand their failures. Although the United States is often a convenient and unfair target for the ills of Egyptian politics, US officials miscalculated by not taking Morsi to task when he clearly acted in an undemocratic way, particularly when he issued his 22 November decree placing himself above the law. Morsi's harsh policies against his detractors were also insufficiently criticized by US officials who were so grateful to Morsi for brokering a truce between Hamas and Israel that they essentially gave him a free pass when he acted as an authoritarian leader. When the United States did increase criticism of the Morsi government in 2013, it had already lost support of the liberals. And when the liberals and secularists settled on the Tamarod campaign as their best vehicle to oppose Morsi, their campaign of "street action" was criticized by the US ambassador. The United States appeared more interested in "stability" for stability's sake than for meeting the democratic aspirations of a majority of Egyptians who wanted Morsi to resign or at least hold new presidential elections. Enduring three more years of a Morsi presidency, including his policies of imposing the Brotherhood's version of Islam on the state and society, was untenable for them but that was what US officials were calling for, at least indirectly. As one Egyptian liberal activist told the international media shortly after Morsi was ousted, because Egypt at this stage did not have an impeachment process, the Tamarod campaign and the military's action against Morsi were the only avenues open to them.⁴² The underlying lesson learned is that the United States must be consistent when dealing with undemocratic or authoritarian policies of a particular regime, even if that regime has cooperated with the United States on some regional issues. It was proper, therefore, for US officials to "deplore" the violence by the security services against the pro-Morsi demonstrators in August 2013, but US officials should also have deplored the incitement to violence by some Brotherhood leaders as well as the violent actions, caught on camera, by some elements in the pro-Morsi protest encampments who shot at security forces.

⁴² Comments by an Egyptian liberal activist in Tahrir Square, as reported by CNN's special program on Egypt, July 3, 2013.

Second, US policymakers must understand that in such a highly polarized environment, it is impossible to please both factions. The most it can do is remain consistent on human rights and work with the winning side and, in that way, try ease the repression of the other side. The new Egyptian government is currently composed of liberals and some Mubarak era figures, with the strong backing of the military. This is the reality now, and the majority of Egyptians support it because they see the Brotherhood as the greater threat.⁴³ Hence, it would not be prudent for the United States to suspend or cutoff aid because that would remove whatever limited influence the United States still has in Egypt, and would not advance the democracy agenda. By continuing this aid, the United States can rebuild its image in Egypt (at least with the majority faction) and urge Egyptian authorities to stick to the timeline to restore the semblance of a democratic government. This timeline involves the rewriting of some controversial clauses in the constitution, a public referendum on the new constitution, and holding parliamentary elections followed by presidential elections. If Egypt meets these benchmarks with minimal violence, it has a chance to establish a semi-democratic government, and this is the most that can be realistically expected at this stage. A true democratic government is unlikely in the near term because the military is likely to maintain a strong, behind-the-scenes role in it.

The question about the future of the Muslim Brotherhood looms large over this scenario. As of this writing, it is unclear whether the Egyptian authorities will outlaw the Brotherhood and its political party. At a minimum, the government is likely to bring some Brotherhood leaders to trial for inciting violence. Outlawing the Brotherhood altogether would certainly please more hardline elements in the new Egyptian government, who have called them “terrorists,” but it could prove to be counter-productive. Some Brotherhood elements could go underground and resort to violence, posing additional problems for the government. The 5 September 2013 assassination attempt against Interior Minister Mohammad Ibrahim may or may not have been orchestrated by such elements, but similar actions against the government are likely if the Brotherhood is outlawed and its political party is prevented from contesting elections.

Given the prevailing sentiment among most Egyptians who support the new government that the US aided and abetted Morsi, American officials would have little influence in persuading Egyptian authorities not to support a wholesale outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, over time, especially if the United States praises Egyptian officials for sticking to its democratic benchmarks, US officials might have a better chance of convincing them that a policy of inclusion, rather than exclusion, would be best for Egypt’s long-term stability and democratic governance. The fact the Egyptian government is itself divided on this issue gives the United States an opening. Such discussions should best be done behind closed doors lest the United States be accused of “interfering in Egypt’s internal affairs,” but when word of such discussions leaks out, as is likely, the United States can also use it to show the Brotherhood

43 Sahar Aziz, “Egypt’s Identity Crisis,” *CNN.com*, August 7, 2013, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/07/egypts-identity-crisis>

that US policy is not directed against Islamists, and that it supports the inclusion of all nonviolent political entities in the political process.

Working with the new Egyptian government and continuing US aid would also have the benefit of preserving (or reactivating) the close security relationship that has benefitted the militaries of both countries for more than three decades. Although the Bright Star exercises have been cancelled, they should be resurrected in 2014 if domestic violence subsides and the Egyptian government fulfills its political roadmap. Each military establishment still values the cooperation it receives from the other, and in the case of the United States, this includes over-flight rights and expedited transit through the Suez Canal—both critically important in case of contingencies in the Persian Gulf. Although Egypt has said it would not cooperate with the United States on possible strikes against Syria, there may be future regional crises in which the two countries can cooperate closely. Moreover, with the hope of renewed Israeli-Palestinian talks on the agenda, the more the security relationship between the United States and Egypt is maintained and supported, the more Egypt will offer support in these negotiations. Although Morsi brokered a truce between Hamas and Israel, he was personally loath to meet with the Israelis. A new Egyptian president will unlikely have such close ties to Hamas, but he may be more cooperative on peace process issues and not have qualms about meeting with Israeli officials in the interest of securing a Palestinian-Israeli peace deal.

Cutting US aid to Egypt would have none of these benefits and runs the strong risk of ending what limited influence the United States currently has in Egypt. Egypt remains a cornerstone country of the Middle East, and right now its nationalist guard is up. American policymakers should best proceed prudently and not take any dramatic action that would harm the relationship. The Middle East remains a dangerous place but cooperation between the United States and Egypt can mitigate these dangers and steer Egypt toward its desired democratic path, even if that path results in a semi-democratic political system.

