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Winter or Spring: Islamists, the Military, and Post-Revolution Politics in Egypt

by David Schenker

The so-called “Arab Spring” has forever changed the face of the Middle East, and it’s not finished. While the revolts that toppled longtime autocrats in Tunisia and Libya were remarkable accomplishments, these states are of little strategic interest to the United States. Unlike Libya and Tunisia, what transpires in Syria — an ally of Iran that possesses a substantial chemical weapons stockpile — could have significant implications for Washington. But Syria remains a work in progress. To date, the most important development in the region for the U.S. has been the fall of Egypt’s longtime president Hosni Mubarak. Since 1977, Egypt has been a strategic partner of the United States — providing essential political support to U.S. policies in the Middle East — and an important peace partner of Israel in a hostile region.

The fall of Mubarak heralds a change in the regional strategic architecture that had been in place since 1979. For decades, the regional balance of power pitted U.S.-oriented Egypt, Turkey, and Israel against anti-Western, terrorist-supporting regimes in Iraq and Iran. While the structure had changed slightly before February 2011 — Iraq dropping off the “adversaries” list in 2003 about the same time that Turkey under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) moved out of the pro-West camp — Egypt remained a key friend to the United States. With the tectonic political and social shifts in post-Mubarak Egypt, however, it is unclear how long this friendship will continue, and what U.S.-Egyptian bilateral relations will look like going forward.

Much of Egypt’s strategic importance stems from its status as a regional trendsetter. With 83 million people, what happens in Egypt has an impact across the region. In the coming months and years, there are several key trends to watch for in Egypt, and, by extension, throughout the Middle East. What follows is a list of some these trends and issues that will shape Egypt in the months and years ahead:

MES Notes

Middle East Studies In Review 2010-2011

MES at MCU recently published a collection of *Middle East Studies In Review 2010-2011*. The collection contains articles appearing in the first two volumes of *MES Insights*. Additionally, the *Review* informs readers of MES activities and of selected engagements by MES staff during the period of 2010-2011.

Middle East Studies In Review is available online at at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab or via Facebook at: middleeaststudies.mcu. To request a hard copy of the *Review* please contact us at: MCU_MES@grc.usmcu.edu.

MES Welcomes AFPAK Hands

LtCol Wade Priddy and LtCol William Rice, of the USMC AFPAK Hands program, join the MES at MCU team.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

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The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In Egypt's recent parliamentary elections held from — November 2011-January 2012 — the MB's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), took 46 percent of 508 seats in the People's Assembly — the lower house of the Egyptian parliament. The group's impressive electoral performance came as little surprise. Although the MB was illegal under Mubarak, it operated for decades, and was not as suppressed as some of Egypt's more liberal organizations. Indeed, after the revolt, the MB's Freedom and Justice Party emerged as the state's leading political organization, with its hierarchy, infrastructure, and message already in place. The MB already had a significant advantage. Egyptian society has for decades been becoming increasingly religiously conservative. The increased prevalence of hijab-wearing women in Egypt may be some anecdotal evidence of this trend: when I lived in Egypt in the early 1990s, only about 10-15 percent of women wore hijab, while now the percentage is closer to 80. When I asked the former MB Deputy General Guide Muhammad Habib about this phenomenon during an interview in Cairo back in 2009, he explained: "We won — the people are with us 100 percent." That the Islamist Ennahda party, Tunisia's iteration of the MB took 40 percent of the seats in parliament — in one of the most secular states in the region — is testament to the group's popularity.

Some observers were actually relieved that the "moderate" MB took control of the parliament, and not the more militant Salafi Islamists. But the MB is far from moderate. To wit, Muhammad Badie — the group's General Guide who spent time in jail with Sayyid Qutb, one of MB founders — predicted in a December 29, 2011 speech that the Islamist government in Cairo would "lead to a rightly-guided caliphate that will instruct the world."

The surprise of the Salafis. While the MB parliamentary plurality was more or less expected, the true surprise of the Egyptian elections was the performance of these more conservative Islamists, who won an astounding 27 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly. Combined with the seats won by the FJP, Islamists hold nearly 75 percent of the People's Assembly.

If indeed the MB ever was moderate, it won't be for long; as the Salafis will be attacking the Brotherhood from the right, pressuring the group to adopt even more conservative social legislation. In December 2011, I was an election monitor in Menoufiya in the Nile Delta, and had the opportunity to chat with several Salafis. We discussed the many changes to come in Egypt, including the imposition of the *jizya* tax levied on non-Muslims, the encasing of Pharaoh statue's faces in wax (to prevent prohibited idolatry), the banning of alcohol, making hijab wearing mandatory, and the institution of the hudud — the cutting of the hands of thieves. The Salafis agree with the MB about the institution of a caliphate. Essentially, the key difference between the groups lies not in the proscriptions of Islam, but in how quickly or severely sharia is implemented. What we are seeing develop in Egypt right now is not necessarily democracy but competitive theocracy.

Post-Mubarak populist politics and Egypt's future orientation. Both the FJP chairman, Muhammad Morsi, and vice chairman, Essam al-Erian, claim that the United States and the international community owe Egypt financial assistance, irrespective of what policies they pursue regarding women, human rights, or protections of minorities. It is viewed as compensation for supporting an authoritarian government in Egypt during the Mubarak era. Notwithstanding the request for financial assistance, the Islamists and the military-appointed government in Egypt are taking provocative positions vis-à-vis Washington — and Israel — which will complicate the bilateral relationship.

Consider the NGO crisis earlier this year, where a decision was taken to prosecute several U.S. citizens working on democracy promotion in Egypt and prevent them from traveling abroad. Going forward, it is conceivable that Egypt may continue to deliberately generate crises, to prove the state's relevance to Washington and ensure continued U.S. financial assistance. To avoid, or de-escalate, these situations, the U.S. and the international community will be obligated to pay what essentially amounts to a rent.

Objectively, this kind of populism makes sense. The Egyptian economy is in free fall, and populist politics are a useful distraction. They also provide useful scapegoats. Egyptians already have a low opinion of the U.S. — according to public opinion polls, 70 percent of Egyptians do not want U.S. financial assistance. Leaders in Tehran also poll more favorably than those in Washington. This trend may have repercussions for long-term bilateral relations, including priority U.S. access to the Suez Canal, over flights with little warning, and the maintenance of the peace treaty with Israel.

The peace treaty with Israel. It is little secret that the MB does not like Israel much. Indeed, the MB has hinted that it might put the Camp David treaty to a popular referendum. Already, Essam al-Erian has announced that should the U.S. cut its financial assistance package to Egypt, it would cause Cairo to review and perhaps modify the treaty. In Spring 2012, the parliament passed a hand-vote resolution declaring Israel to be Egypt's "number one enemy," calling for the Israeli ambassador to be expelled from Cairo, and demanding an end to Egyptian sales of natural gas to Israel. While the resolution is non-binding, as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) remains in control, the military has indicated its intention to return to its barracks following the June presidential elections. What happens then remains to be seen. I think, however, that the treaty is safe in the short-term, due to the state of the economy. The MB knows that stability is key to rebuilding. Still, in late April 2012, Egypt suspended gas sales to its peace partner.

The SCAF's imminent return to the barracks. Some observers suspect there have been behind-the-scenes dealings between the SCAF and the MB, even a tacit agreement on a division of labor going forward, with the military continuing to determine foreign policy and national security issues while the MB focuses on domestic politics and social issues, such as the further Islamization of society. Whether or not such a deal ever existed is unclear. If there ever was, though, it probably is no longer in force. In spring 2012, tensions between the SCAF and the MB were on the rise after the MB announced (in contradiction to previous statements) its intention to run a presidential candidate and the subsequent permanent disqualification of the MB's front-runner candidate by Egypt's presidential electoral commission. The Islamists' calls for the dismissal of the SCAF-appointed government of Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri — and the dispute over the MB's participation in the upcoming presidential elections — have only further strained the ties, to the point that the SCAF has threatened a crackdown on the MB.

Conflict between the SCAF and the MB is inevitable, as both groups want to implement a Turkish model in Egypt. For the SCAF, the model is that of the pre-AKP before the Erdogan premiership, when the military served as guardian of secular society in Turkey, periodically removing Islamist governments from power. The MB, however, looks to the Erdogan model, where Islamists control the parliament and the executive, and over time, bring the military to heel. Given these divergent views, it is just a matter of time until a SCAF-MB showdown.

SCAF Competency? Since day one, Washington has had an abiding confidence in the SCAF's competence. At the time of the revolution, the United States applauded the military for not opening fire on the crowds. The White House even took credit for its restraint: \$66 billion in financial assistance since 1979, so the argument went, bought the United States influence and prevented more bloodshed. In reality, the U.S. has little influence on the SCAF today.

The confidence in the SCAF is misplaced, as the council has in fact proven itself grossly incompetent. In the months leading to the formation of the Constituent Assembly, for example, the SCAF changed its rules multiple times, first announcing that the newly elected parliament would select the members of the constitutional drafting committee. However, as a result of the elections, the Islamists took control of parliament. Therefore, the SCAF changed its mind and allowed the Islamists to select only 20 percent of the seats and appointed the other 80 percent itself. When the Islamists protested, the military backed down completely. The committee now is comprised almost entirely of Islamists. The SCAF also grossly mismanaged

the NGO crisis, allowing a situation in which Sam Lahood — the son of U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray Lahood — was essentially prohibited from leaving Egypt. Yet another failing of the SCAF has been its inability to reestablish security in Egypt since Mubarak's ouster.

MES Notes (cont.)

20 April 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Arab Spring A Year Later: What Is Growing?" at University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, VA.

May 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi published "Political Struggles over the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands" in *Under the Drones*, edited by Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews (Harvard University Press, 2012).

2 May 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Taliban: From Adversary to Partner?" at symposium entitled: *War Termination: How Terrorist and Radical Groups End*, Quantico, VA.

Insecurity. Ever since the revolution, Egypt has faced difficulties in reestablishing security. Initially, the combination of economic stresses, a diminished security apparatus, and the flight of criminals from state jails contributed to a rise in the crime rate. The near absence of tourism and foreign direct investment and a serious case of inflation over the past year have only raised the poverty rate and collective sense of desperation. Today, heretofore violent crimes in Egypt — car jackings, armed robberies, and kidnapping, for example — are becoming routine.

Chances are also better than ever that if you perpetrate a crime, you will not be caught. Demoralized, underpaid, and no longer encouraged to subsidize paltry incomes through corruption, police officers have not been showing up for work. Meanwhile, State Security — the former regime's repressive apparatus and domestic counterterrorism organization — has lost much of its capacity. Indeed, State Security shredded a significant portion of its files during the uprising to insulate itself from accountability. Currently, the organization is reportedly undergoing a process of "restructuring." The prospects for an improved security situation anytime soon — something critical to jumpstarting the tourist economy — are slim.

Terrorism. The Sinai has long proved fertile ground for terrorists, and the situation in the peninsula has only deteriorated since the revolution. Terrorists escaping jail during the revolution flowed back into the Sinai, and an al-Qaeda affiliate named *Ansar al-Jihad* set up shop there. The result is an increasingly lawless, if not ungoverned, territory, in which the terrorist threat is severe. It is unclear at present exactly how much success *Ansar al-Jihad* is having recruiting local Bedouin, but there are some signs that these jihadists are making headway. In August 2011, after the al-Arish police station attack, a statement was issued by "al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula," demanding the implementation of *sharia* and the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the Sinai. That same month, via the internet, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri congratulated the terrorists who bombed the pipeline in July — and exhorted his followers to target more Israelis. Earlier this year in January, *Ansar al-Jihad* announced its support for Zawahiri, as well as its plans to attack the SCAF and U.S. interests abroad. Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations are also becoming a problem, crossing into the Sinai and attacking Israel from Egyptian territory. In addition to being dangerous, terrorism in the Sinai is undermining the tourist economy there.

Egypt's economy still in crisis. Egypt is on the brink of an economic crisis, with reportedly as little as \$11 billion remaining in foreign reserves, and depleting at a rate of nearly \$1 billion a month. The absence of security and a concern about the future direction of the state have spooked tourists and investors alike. Without foreign direct investment and tourism, Egypt's economy has worsened, and hardship has increased. Polling suggests that economic factors contributed greatly to the revolt. Likewise, when polled, a majority of Egyptians said they expected their personal economic situations to improve as a result of the uprising. It is safe to say that to date, at least economically, the post-Mubarak government has not met popular expectations. With poverty on the upswing, in May 2011, General Mahmoud Nasr, a member of the governing Supreme Military Council, held a Cairo news conference last month and announced that if the situation did not improve, there would be another revolution in Egypt — "a revolution of the hungry." Improving the economy will be a key priority of the Brotherhood's ruling Freedom and Justice Party in the coming months and years. In the interest of pragmatism, this overriding priority could serve to constrain some of these Islamists excesses, in particular, the full implementation of *sharia*, in the near term. Notwithstanding, it is unclear that even a less corrupt and economically competent Muslim Brotherhood will be able to ameliorate the longstanding economic difficulties of Egypt.

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