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Egypt's Democratic Process Among the Victims of the Gaza Conflict

by Amin Tarzi

Post-revolution Egypt's role in the weeklong November 2012 conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza introduced the possibility of Egyptian involvement in an armed conflict involving the Israeli state. This dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict has not been present since the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978. While the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians has fluctuated between open hostilities and periods of hopefulness, the situation has been largely managed by Israel and its main ally, the United States, and kept from transforming into a wider war such as the 1967 or 1973 examples. One can argue that the primary reason for this management has been the absence of Egypt as an adversary of Israel.

Egypt's January 25, 2011 revolution inspired hopes of democratic transformation within Egypt. While Egyptians experienced relatively free voting, the revolution did not result in what some in the West had hoped would set the precedent for democracy in the Middle East. Their desire for a liberal, pro-Western system respecting the human rights for all of its citizens was left unfulfilled. Rather, the Muslim Brotherhood won the majority of the parliamentary elections, and one of its members, Muhammad Mursi, became Egypt's first ever democratically elected president. Mursi's primary obligations to his constituents are to deliver on the basic promises of the Muslim Brotherhood, which include Islamizing Egypt, social justice, explicit or implicit independence from foreign control, and economic improvement of Egypt's downtrodden; however, he cannot ignore the group's staunch pro-Palestinian position. This has been woven into much of the Muslim Brotherhood's overall message internally and has been an instrument to expand the group's reach into other Muslim states or territories. Indeed, Hamas was founded in the mid-1980s on this premise and as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

As such, during the latest armed crisis in Gaza, Mursi, unlike his predecessor Husni Mubarak, was very vocal in his support of Hamas, and Egypt became symbolically and effectively the main powerbroker between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The United States and others in the region praised Mursi's efforts and diplomatic skills. The question beyond this conflict is how a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Egypt will influence the future of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, specifically as it relates to Hamas. Hamas' actions will depend on which course Egypt decides to take. One can argue, on the one hand, that Hamas will become more cavalier in its relations with Israel because it feels is has a friend in Cairo. On the other hand, if Egypt decides to withhold major logistical or military support from Hamas, the organization will need to find a way to live with the reality of Israel as a powerful state—despite its aversion to such a concept.

Egypt's Democracratic Process... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

MES Notes

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In this most recent crisis, despite the symbolic recall of his ambassador from Israel and the dispatch of his prime minister to Gaza in a show of solidarity, Mursi, from the outset of the conflict, genuinely tried to lessen the armed hostilities and broker a ceasefire. If an Egyptian president who seemingly shares Hamas' ideological and religious sentiments does not support its military adventurism, then who would? One such country has been the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Fajr-5 rockets that reportedly were used to reach Tel Aviv and possibly Jerusalem are of Iranian origin.

Initially, Iranian reaction to the revolution in Egypt was very positive. However, Tehran's enthusiasm has been dampened by Cairo's refusal to march to the tune of Iran's version of Islamism. While Mursi made headlines in August 2012 by becoming the first Egyptian head of state to visit Tehran to participate at the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, he quickly disappointed his hosts by openly criticizing the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad, Iran's most steadfast Arab ally. During the latest crisis between Israel and Hamas, Mursi reportedly declined the request of the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi to visit Gaza. Turkey and Qatar supported Egypt's resurgence as the regional powerbroker, dealing a blow to Iran's visions of regional prowess.

In fact, it seems that Iran's marriage of convenience with Hamas is in trouble. The Palestinians are being courted by their brethren among the Islamist Sunnis who are now in power in Egypt and form the base of the opposition against al-Asad in Syria. While Israel may celebrate this shift, it is under no pretense that a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Egypt would stop its support of the Palestinians, especially Hamas. However, the Gaza crisis has illustrated that Mursi is, for now, sticking to his country's peace treaty with Israel.

But at what price?

Mursi's sentiments are most likely much more sympathetic to the views and aspirations of Hamas than the security of the State of Israel—a pillar of which is maintenance of peace with Egypt. Unlike the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's main short- to medium-term goals are Egypt-centric, and Mursi has to balance his group's popular mandate with a multitude of factors to achieve them. Among many challenges facing Mursi's government, four require immediate attention, lest his victory in the polls be his swansong. The most immediate concern pertains to the finalization of the writing of Egypt's new constitution, which the Muslim Brotherhood is trying to manipulate to its advantage. Thereafter, the relationship between the Mursi's group and the Salafis—whose party, al-Nur captured 27.8 percent of the vote in Egypt's parliamentary elections of November 2011 and January 2012, has to be in the minds of Muslim Brotherhood leadership. They cannot relinquish the mantle of Islamism to the newcomers to the Egyptian politics who accuse the Brotherhood of not being true Muslims, in part for Egypt's continued adherence to the Camp David Accords. The delicate relationship between the elected president and the Egyptian armed forces is the third challenge. Mursi needs to provide room for the military to preserve its budgetary freedom and continue to receive U.S. aid and to respect the peace treaty with Israel. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly in its popular standing, Mursi's government has to take immediate steps towards improving Egypt's economic situation since blame can no longer fall on the bureaucrats, generals or foreigners for the continuation of social injustice in the country.

The Egyptian president may loathe what realpolitik forced him to do in Gaza, but as someone who has stated that his group's goals are long-term in nature, Mursi's handling of the Gaza crisis has illustrated that he is not a revolutionary, but rather a calculated politician with an ideology, the triumph of which he may not see during his term in office, but towards which he seems to be steering his country step by step. After receiving international recognition for his handling of the crisis in Gaza and reestablishing Egypt's role as a partner of the United States and Israel in peacemaking in the region—perhaps also curtailing the longhand of Iran in Gaza—Mursi did not waste but a day to announce a Constitutional Declaration effectively providing himself with broad legislative, executive, constitutional and judicial authorities and immunity from judicial oversight.

It seems that in addition to those who died during the weeklong conflict between Israel and Hamas, the nascent democratic experience in Egypt also has received a near fatal blow.

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Military Restructuring and Yemen's Stalled Transition

by Adam C Seitz

One year ago, on November 23, 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, ending his 33 year presidency and transferring power to then Vice President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi as a first step in Yemen's transition. Nearly one year after Saleh signed the GCC Initiative, the preparatory committee for national dialogue announced that Yemen's Conference for National Dialogue had been pushed back to early 2013. The Dialogue is an essential element of the Initiative aimed at unifying a deeply divided country and laying the foundation for the drafting of a new constitution. The November announcement marked the latest delay since the April 2012 date for National Dialogue was first announced, highlighting the challenges Yemen still faces moving forward with implementing the GCC Initiative. One barrier that continues to stand in the way of National Dialogue, and further implementation of the Initiative as a whole, is the restructuring of the armed forces. Although the restructuring of the Yemeni armed forces is stipulated as a part of the first phase of the GCC Initiative, ambiguity within the document has left room for Saleh's relatives to maintain their posts in the military in post-Saleh Yemen.

This is especially troublesome given the fact that, while no longer the president, Saleh continues to exert influence over Yemen's affairs through his relatives continued control of key military posts and his role as head of the General People's Congress, which under the GCC Initiative shares power with the Joint Member's Party (JMP). Saleh's continued influence through his familial ties to military commanders raises the risk of armed conflict among Yemen's competing factions, especially in the event that the Dialogue fails. It is for this reason that the Yemeni youth movement and the JMP see the restructuring of the military as a prerequisite for their participation in the Conference for National Dialogue, stipulated as part of the second phase of the transfer of power in the Gulf Initiative. Due to the role of the JMP in the unity government and the role of the revolutionary youth in the 2011 uprisings, their absence would likely doom the Dialogue from the start. Although Hadi has made several decrees aimed towards restructuring the armed forces and limiting Saleh's influence over the military, concerns of premature Dialogue absent significant progress in the restructuring of the Yemeni armed forces should not be ignored.

Out with the Old Guard?

During Saleh's reign the military had become an indispensable tool of control for the regime. It played an essential role in Yemen's patronage system, and in recent years had become a tool to marginalize potential rivals to Saleh and his dynastic aspirations. In early 2011, the Saleh regime faced widespread anti-government protests. As the tactics against demonstrators became more violent, the regime lost support at home and abroad resulting in the fracturing of the military, with the most prominent defection being the commander of Yemen's northwestern military region, Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar—a former member of Saleh's inner circle who, over the past decade, was sidelined as a potential challenger to Saleh's plans for his son, General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, to succeed him. Following the November 2011 transfer of power the military remained divided between competing factions that were dominated, on the one side, by units commanded by Saleh's kin and, on the other, forces under the command of Major General al-Ahmar.

MES Notes (cont.)

21 September 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Islamic Republic of Iran's Weltanschauung" to Training Command, Military Academy of the Czech Republic, Vyškov.

26 September 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled "The Role of the Egyptian Armed Forces in Post-Mubarak Egypt" at a colloquium entitled "Armées et revolutions arabes," hosted by Ecoles de Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan, Rennes, France.

8 November 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled "The Politics of Dissent and the Prospects for Political Change in Afghanistan" as part of a lecture seriesentitled "Social Justice and the Politics of Dissent in the Muslim World" hosted by The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ.

Yemen Military Restructuring... (CONTINUED ON PG 4)

The use of the army in crackdowns on demonstrators and the fracturing of the Yemeni military during the 2011 uprisings further underscored the need for comprehensive reform of the armed forces. The restructuring of the armed forces became a key demand of the opposition to the Saleh regime. To this end, articles 16 and 17 of the "Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen" of the GCC Initiative stipulate that in the first transitional phase the Vice President (Hadi) shall establish and chair a Committee on Military Affairs for Achieving Security and Stability. During the two transitional phases, the Committee is tasked to, among other things, "create the necessary conditions and take the necessary steps to integrate the armed forces under unified, national and professional leadership in the context of rule of law." Just days after the GCC Initiative was signed, Hadi moved forward with the establishment of a committee aimed at restructuring the military, however vague the committees mandate may be.

And In With the New?

As a first step toward reforming the Yemeni military, President Hadi announced a reshuffle of a number of commands in April 2012, replacing several Saleh loyalists and kin, including a nephew of the former president, who commanded the Presidential Guard, and one of Saleh's half-brothers, who served as the commander of the Air Force. The reshuffle, however, left Saleh's family in command of a number of key posts, including the elite Republican Guard, commanded by the ex-president's son, General Ahmed Ali Saleh, and the Interior Ministry's Central Security Forces, headed by one of Saleh's nephews, General Yahya Muhammad Abdullah Seleh. Although the move was championed as an important first step at purging Saleh loyalists from the military, the decrees were seen as not going far enough, as Saleh's relatives still held key commands within the military, giving the former president continued influence over Yemeni affairs. The decree also left Major General al-Ahmar in command of the army's 1st Armoured Division. The continued control of units commanded by rival Generals Saleh and al-Ahmar divides the military's loyalties between the two camps, further hindering a process intended to a unified and professional, national military.

In an attempt to limit the powers of the competing military factions led by General Saleh and General al-Ahmar, the Hadi government announced the completion of the first stage of army restructuring in August 2012 with Presidential Decisions 32 and 33. The decisions reduced the size of the forces under Saleh's son, General Ahmed Saleh, and General al-Ahmar, and at the same time established a Presidential Protection Force, which fell directly under the control of the President. The completion of the first stage of military restructuring should be viewed as a rebalancing of forces controlled by competing factions rather than moves to unify the armed forces.

While in the short-term such decisions provide Hadi more room to maneuver and establish a power base to wrestle control from Saleh, as well as other factions, they do little in the way of moving towards a military based on national interests, rather personal loyalties and patronage. In the long term this risks further factionalization, and possibly plunging Yemen into a protracted civil war, if such moves are not followed up with more comprehensive reforms aimed at establishing a unified national command structure.

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