



Insight

The Problem with Obama's Egypt Policy

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The Arab Spring brought a new reality to Egypt: a democratically elected Islamist government, and a population that found its voice. Despite this seismic shift, U.S. policy toward Egypt is stuck in the framework of the Mubarak era. The Obama administration's perceived backing of the Muslim Brotherhood risks empowering forces that could yet prove hostile to U.S. interests while spurning the very reformers we profess to support.

Two years in, Egypt's transition has not gone the way many had hoped. Democracy did not bring to power the secular, liberal forces that received so much attention during the Tahrir Square protests of 2011. Instead, Egyptians voted into power Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. President Morsi and his allies proceeded to orchestrate undemocratic power grabs and muscle through a controversial constitution. Press freedom is under attack, female protesters face sexual assault, and Coptic Christians report harassment. Egypt's economy is in shambles, and incompetence on the part of Morsi's government has turned off many of its one-time backers.

Many are tempted to blame President Obama for the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent. In reality, the U.S. could not have prevented the fall of former President Mubarak, and it was the Egyptian people who chose the Brotherhood at the ballot box. Moreover, the Obama administration's decision to engage with the Brotherhood was the right call, so long as it committed to democratic principles, minority rights, women's rights, and Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.

In spite of its many shortcomings, the Brotherhood's rise to power so far has been neither calamitous nor advantageous for U.S. national interests. It has not yet turned Egypt into a theocracy. It has not rescinded Egypt's treaty with Israel, and it even brokered a helpful ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. U.S.-Egypt military cooperation continues, and the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty remains in place. Brotherhood members have not yet translated their most troubling rhetoric into official government policy.

Still, the perception exists – and not just among Obama's domestic critics – that his administration actively supports the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi. The Director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies recently published an [“open letter”](#) in which he accused President Obama of giving cover to Morsi's human rights abuses. An Egyptian Coptic activist [urged](#) Obama “to stop supporting the Muslim Brotherhood flat out.” Signs from Egyptian protesters reading, [“Obama, your B**** is our Dictator,”](#) [“Obama you jerk,”](#) and

“Obama, Don’t send your dollars to jihadists,” have gone viral.

Indeed, actions by the Obama administration seem to have rewarded Morsi at the worst possible moments. In September, just weeks after Egyptian security forces allowed a mob to attack the U.S. embassy in Cairo, the administration notified Congress of its intent to provide \$450 million in new budget support to the Morsi government.

In November, just one day after receiving effusive praise from Obama for his efforts to end the Gaza crisis, Morsi decreed all measures enacted by his government to be immune from court challenge. The U.S. issued a statement of concern, but it paled in comparison to the plaudits for Morsi’s efforts in Gaza.

And last month, a previously scheduled transfer of F-16s went ahead in the midst of the deadliest protests Morsi has faced to date.

It has become commonplace to say that Egypt simply passed from one dictatorship to another. The same can be said for U.S. policy. If America was guilty of overlooking Egypt’s human rights violations and democracy deficit in order to maintain the benefits of its strategic relationship with the Mubarak regime, it certainly has not gotten any better today. Indeed, the main difference between our aid program then and now is Obama’s promise of *additional* monies.

This business as usual attitude is troubling for those who care about democracy and human rights. It is deeply alarming for those who harbor skepticism about the Brotherhood’s ultimate aims.

But it also shows a failure to understand a basic lesson of the Arab Spring: governments are subject to change, even in the Arab world. Egypt is far from stable. Egypt’s Defense Minister recently *warned* that the country’s latest crisis “could lead to grave repercussions” including “a collapse of the state.” Even if Morsi’s government survives street protests and its own incompetence, elections could sweep it from power down the road. Putting all our eggs in one basket makes less sense today than it ever did.

A course correction is needed to address the concern that the U.S. has sided with the Muslim Brotherhood over Egypt’s democrats. The administration could start by showing more sensitivity in the distribution of its foreign aid – the timing of the F-16 transfer and \$450 million in aid were particularly tone-deaf. The administration should take more seriously the conditions Congress has placed on aid to Egypt, rather than immediately waiving

them as Secretary Clinton did last year. And since the level of assistance Egypt is seeking from the IMF dwarfs our bilateral economic aid, the U.S. should use all our leverage at the IMF to hold Morsi accountable.

At the same time, the U.S. should publicly broaden its engagement with the many disparate forces active in Egypt today. High-level officials should sit down with members of the Egyptian opposition, listen to their claims of mistreatment by the Morsi government, and follow up on them. We should press Morsi harder to lift the restrictions on non-governmental organizations that resulted in the arrest and trial of individuals for receiving funds from the U.S. Ties with Egypt's military, which has not been entirely coopted by the Brotherhood, should be maintained for both their strategic value and the role the military may once again play in resolving a political crisis.

Admittedly, crafting the right Egypt policy is not easy. If the U.S. pushes the Muslim Brotherhood away prematurely, it may radicalize them. But too close an embrace, as we seem to have today, risks supporting an agenda we may ultimately abhor. The Obama administration needs to walk a fine line that neither alienates a strategically important ally nor emboldens enemies of freedom..

Times have changed in Egypt; U.S. policy needs to change with them.