Managing Egypt

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We have continued our long-standing research of violent political organizations in the Middle East with direct interactions with those groups and their leaders. Recently, we have had lengthy discussions with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt, illuminating our research and conclusions about the MB’s program. We believe the planned MB reforms and governance maneuvers form part of an attempt to capture power and remove any obstacles to their long-standing, and long-term objectives.

The political personality of Egypt’s Government today is the product of ideology and circumstances: ideological values inherited by the present leaders of Egypt from the MB movement that originated in the country over 80 years ago; along with the circumstances related to the MB’s recent ascension to political power, and the economic and social responsibilities of exercising that power.

The Egyptian MB has successfully outmaneuvered other political groups and can now run the country in pursuit of its own religious and ideological values and goals. Those goals include promoting Islamic law in Egyptian society, increasing economic opportunities for its citizens, uniting the Arab world under the leadership of Egypt, securing long-term political dominance at home, and confronting Israel through rebuilding its own military strength, and actively supporting the Palestinian cause.

The Government of Egypt, however, is heavily constrained by the weakness of its national economy. This weakness results in dependence on foreign aid and investment, unsustainable subsidies on fuel and food, and the constant risk of labor unrest. The MB is further constrained by Egypt’s legacy of endemic corruption, violent crime that not only hurts its own citizens but also delays the restoration of tourism, and its (so far) cautious policy toward the entrenched power of the wealthy, the bureaucracy, the military, and the judiciary.

It would be unwise, however, to assume that these constraints, arising from the MB’s governance responsibilities, will restrain ideological ambitions indefinitely. For decades, the MB endured repression, imprisonment, torture and death, without moderating its goals. The MB brings resolve and patience to its governance. Its leaders have a pragmatic approach to their pursuit of consolidated power. As a result, political and economic constraints cannot be expected to change the MB’s oft-stated strategic objectives, including political leadership of the larger Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and acquiring the means to challenge Israel’s existence – even though it has shown tactical willingness to accept short-to-mid-term compromises (e.g., acceptance of IMF loans, adherence to international treaties). Indeed, our recent talks with MB leaders and allies suggest that their plan for reforming Egypt’s political and economic infrastructure is part of a broader strategy for whittling away obstacles to achieving those long-term objectives.
As the MB pursues consolidation of power through the actions of its members in government along with society as a whole, the practicalities of governance create tensions for the MB that offer us opportunities to influence their pursuit of hegemonic power. President Morsi’s popular support is still strong; however, the honeymoon is likely to end unless the economy revives quickly – an unlikely prospect. When the honeymoon ends, the MB leadership will face a difficult choice between further delay in pursuit of its long-term goals, while improving the economy, and the alternative of pursuing a purist path to achieve its religious and ideological goals.

Either way, the MB has little history of commitment to the democratic process, which it describes as only a “tool” of Islam for governance among other possible tools. Indeed, it is plausible that the MB will seek to retain permanent power, resulting in erosion or elimination of the democratic process.

The United States has an interest in:

1. Restraining Egypt from further empowering its affiliates in Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria and elsewhere to the point where Islamist rule becomes entrenched and hegemonic in the region;
2. Preventing a confrontation with Israel;
3. Convincing Egypt to force Hamas to contain Gaza’s increasingly violent jihadists;
4. Preventing the loss of American influence in the region by pushing Egypt toward other suitors;
5. Avoiding the humanitarian disaster that would arise were Egypt unable to feed its 80 million people;
6. Sustaining democracy in Egypt so that there will be a responsible opposition to assume power, should the Brotherhood lose its popular mandate;
7. Defending and promoting values and principles (such as women’s and minority rights and freedom of religion) in Egypt and the region; and
8. Preventing proliferation of religious, cultural, and political conflict in the region.

To these ends, the US must prevent the MB from capturing the coercive power of the state (including the police, and especially, the army) and expanding its reach (e.g., remilitarization of Sinai). Some MB and Salafi leaders talk about expanding their power and reach through the acquisition of nuclear capabilities. This goal has not been tempered or abated with the MB’s assumption of power. It must be prevented. Our policy must be in place well before any program begins that could eventually lead to the development of nuclear weapons.

The United States has substantial leverage because of Egypt’s dependence on it for foreign aid and investment, the close ties between the American and Egyptian militaries, and Egypt’s preference for American technology and private enterprise. However, we must recognize that the Egyptian revolution was undertaken in part to free the country from what was seen as the Mubarak’s regime’s overly dependent ties with America and the West.

The MB currently leads the government through its predominant position in a diverse coalition, within which it is seeking ways to consolidate power. Although the MB’s leaders preach patience, they plan strategically. They will bide their time by enacting policies that allow them to solidify power, without necessarily moderating their long-term political and ideological goals. To limit the MBs power to realize these goals, the United States and its allies must have a strategy of engagement with Egypt that contains, and if necessary, undermines the Brotherhood’s long-term push toward regional dominance that will threaten Israeli and America’s interests. That strategy has four parts:

1. Engage the Egyptian government, using the leverage provided by foreign and military aid, while publicly demonstrating our respect for Egyptian independence;
2. Use wedge issues to separate the MB from other Islamist groups and from the most radical individuals within the movement;
3. Collaborate with the international community to limit the MB’s ability to achieve ideological and hegemonic ambitions in Egypt and the region; and
4. Promote conditions that offer plausible long-term hope that forces of modernity will eventually flourish.

Our strategy should be designed to succeed regardless of the MB’s tactical response to the responsibilities of governance. Its tactical decisions are always informed by its overall strategy without revealing that strategy. Ours should be as well.

1. Engagement with Respect

The Egyptian revolution is almost universally accepted in Egypt as morally just and as a way to free Egypt from external influence. The MB exploits this status to impose its ideology, presented as “the will of the people.” Any actions on our part that directly challenge the legitimacy of the Brotherhood or the Islamic government will be seen as rejecting the principles of the revolution, thereby driving the Egyptian people away from our values and interests. Accordingly, the US should pursue engagement in ways that demonstrate respect for the revolution and for the independence of the Egyptian people.

Therefore, foreign aid should target actions consistent with our morals, framed in terms like, “the people of the United States require that foreign aid be conditioned on the respect for individual freedoms of all, including women and minorities, which was ultimately expressed in the freedom that came from the Egyptian revolution.”

Such respectful engagement does not entail accepting the MB’s ideology or hegemonic ambitions; rather, it provides a necessary condition for limiting its moral and political reach by empowering the freedom of choice that was the Egyptian Revolution’s moral mandate.

2. Separation through Wedge Issues

A strategy of separation through wedge issues will limit purist and hegemonic ideologies by forcing them to confront conflicts within their ranks. To date, the MB has gained strength and credibility from its alliance with the Salafi parties. These relations run deep. For example, the presidential candidate backed by An-Nour, the largest Salafi party, was Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, a founder of the radical Gama’a Islamiyah and subsequently a member of the MB’s Executive Council (until 2009). Although the Salafis share many of the Brotherhood’s ultimate ends, Salafis often oppose the Brotherhood’s patient use of tactical compromise to achieve them. Even though all Islamist parties share certain values, there are differences that can be leveraged. Compared to the MB, Egypt’s Salafis are:

1. Purist and traditional rather than pragmatic and adaptable;
2. “Outsiders” rather than incumbents, with a proclivity to criticize rather than defend the actions of the government and the state of the economy; and
3. Impatient rather than strategic, as seen in demands for immediate implementation of Sharia and expensive popular programs.

Wedge issues include:

1. Women’s rights;
2. Minority rights, especially for Christians and those accused of blasphemy;
3. Willingness to accept foreign aid and investment with “strings”;
4. Maintenance of the peace treaty with Israel;
5. Supremacy of political over religious authorities;
6. The autonomy of the armed forces;
7. Rivalry in Syria, where there have already been reports of clashes between Al-Thani of Qatar who supports armed groups of MB, and the Saudi royal family, which supports the Salafis; and
8. Rivalry in Gaza where Hamas, an affiliate of the Brotherhood, has already used force to suppress Salafi challengers.

These wedge issues can be leveraged in several different ways:

1. Salafi clerics are poorly disciplined. Some are prone to extremist statements, revealing raw anti-Semitism, disdain for women’s equality, and advocacy of punishments such as cutting off the hands of thieves and death for adulterers. Provoking then publicizing such statements will force the Salafis to either stand by those clerics (and risk loss of mainstream support and friendship of the MB) or reject them (and risk fracturing the Salafi movement). For example, the one political figure who has positioned himself as credible leader of both the MB and the Salafis is Dr. Safwat Hegazi. In addition to being the Secretary General for the Revolutionary Council and the World Organization of Sunni Scholars, which makes him a moral compass for the Islamists, he is a well-known cleric and television preacher who presented Muhammad Morsi’s candidacy before a crowd of hundreds of thousands. (Our interviews indicate that he was instrumental, through discussions with MB leaders Muhammed Badie and Khairat Shater, in having Morsi selected as the MB’s presidential candidate). Getting Dr. Hegazi to go on record on any of the wedge issues might undermine the MB’s ability to work with the Salafis.
2. The USG and sympathetic NGOs can support those public figures who articulate the importance of these wedge issues;
3. The USG can issue statements about the importance of equal rights for women, and rights for minorities, invoking universal principles and UN treaties and resolutions; and
4. The USG can encourage relevant IGO’s and NGO’s to adhere to their own established principles to issues in the Egyptian public discourse. For example, the IMF can declare that equality for women is a vital part of economic development, and hence is relevant to the conditions of its development loans.

3. Collaboration with the International Community

The ideology of the MB has been exported from Egypt throughout the Middle East and North Africa over several decades. Now other MB groups are vying for national prominence in Jordan, Syria, the Palestinian Territories and elsewhere. The Egyptian Brotherhood draws strength and legitimacy from these groups in advancing its domestic agenda.

Attempting to prevent the MB’s consolidation of power in Egypt and the spread of its ideology and hegemonic ambitions across the region presents a real challenge, given suspicions of the US and its allies, in Egypt and the region. Consequently, the US should build an international consortium of states, IGOs, NGOs, universities, corporations, faith-based organizations and prominent individuals to promote democratic values, the rights of women and minorities, and other wedge issues. The engagement by multiple voices echoing US values and principles will help amplify US concerns and provide other avenues to influence and split elements of the MB.
Such a coalition of like-minded actors could prove critical as the MB attempts to solidify its control of the media and internal messaging to Egyptians.

Finally, concerted international cooperation can help maintain our place as Egypt's primary source of foreign assistance, along with the leverage that brings. A common refrain of the current Egyptian government is that, "the West should remember, President Morsi’s first state visit outside the region was to China."

4. Promote Forces of Modernization

Any overt Western efforts to help re-engineer society in the direction of a pluralistic democracy are likely to be viewed with suspicion and resentment, hence likely to fail. Although the US cannot stand idly as forces emerge in the region that threaten the interests and security of the US and its allies, the US can promote more inclusive political culture that:

- Support efforts to jointly promote Democracy and Islam. Our research finds that about 80 percent of the Egyptian people (and indeed, people throughout the region) favor both Democracy and Islam. However, the union of these two political and social frameworks in Egyptian society is a work in progress which needs to grow out of local conditions, rather than being directed from outside. There are presently significant differences in how many in Egypt, as opposed to how many in the West, view equal rights for minorities and women, the relative importance of individual rights versus collective rights, and freedom of expression (especially regarding different religious, non-religious, and even anti-religious views). Western democratic initiatives that are insensitive to these differences could well backfire.

- Work with Egyptian organizations to promote grass-roots organizations, which promote issues such as education, human values, health, job-training, and labor unions, with the goal of holding the government accountable on the principles of Democracy and Islam.

- Encourage peer-to-peer (rather than government-to-government) communication to foster social and political relationships and economic enterprise (e.g., private sector trade delegations, investment symposiums, education exchange, etc.). Enlist technology platforms and outlets with global ties to engage in Egypt actively.

- Provide culturally appropriate role models that appeal to the desire for heroic action, idealism and passion of youth, who dream of glory and search for dignity and respect.

- Enlist diverse, innovative non-governmental sectors – faith-based organizations, American universities, business groups, technology companies, and the entertainment media – to help finance, explore, and establish these kinds of initiatives.

The strategy of the United States cannot realistically seek to alter the MB’s fundamental beliefs. But US strategy can, and must, seek to constrain the MB’s control over the elements of power in Egypt and the region. The U.S. government’s ultimate goal should be to sustain Egypt’s democratic process so that the MB’s long-term ambitions do not become a reality and a permanent part of the Egyptian and regional landscape.