



## The Enduring Challenge of Engaging Islamists

### Lessons from Egypt

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#### SUMMARY

- Three years after the Arab uprisings, the U.S. government still lacks a coherent strategy for engaging with Arab opposition movements in general and Islamist opposition groups in particular.
  - The case of U.S. engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a prime example of this broader problem.
  - The absence of trust—and the strength of competing narratives—complicated meaningful engagement with Brotherhood officials and then the Morsi government.
  - The U.S. should establish regular, and not just ad-hoc, channels of dialogue with Brotherhood and other opposition figures in exile and coordinate such outreach with the European Union.
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In the wake of the 1992 military coup in Algeria, the first Bush administration began grappling with the question of what to do about Islamist parties participating in—and winning—elections. In the two decades since, the United States has struggled to develop working, productive relationships with mainstream Islamist movements. The recent failure to engage effectively with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a prime example of this broader problem. The U.S. government still lacks a coherent strategy for engaging with Arab opposition movements in general and Islamist opposition groups in particular.

After the Arab uprisings of early 2011, there was a desire on the part of policymakers to “normalize” relations with Islamist groups—treating them as they would any other party according to a consistent

set of standards, including adherence to nonviolence, commitment to pluralism and human rights, and support for, or at least respect of, U.S. national security interests. Implicit here was an acknowledgment that previous administrations had treated Islamist groups as “exceptional” in a manner that was counterproductive.

Whether Islamist parties are “normal” political actors subject to the same pressures and incentive structures as any other is outside the scope of this brief.<sup>1</sup> But what Islamists are—and how key regional actors perceive them—are two very different things. The fact remains that many of our closest

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Islamist “exceptionalism,” see Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 49-51.

allies, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and the Egyptian state, all view various strains of political Islam—violent and nonviolent alike—as abnormal and an existential threat. Accordingly, pressure has mounted on Western democracies to treat the Brotherhood as a criminal organization. In March 2014, British Prime Minister David Cameron ordered an investigation into the Brotherhood and its activities, including alleged links to terrorism. Britain’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir John Jenkins, was tasked to lead the review.

Also in March, Saudi Arabia took the unprecedented step of designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, meaning that perceived support or even sympathy for the organization and its ideas can now be treated as a criminal act. For the first time, there is a concerted regional effort to deliver a decisive blow to the Muslim Brotherhood not just in Egypt, but more broadly. Since the July 3, 2013, military coup in Egypt, the Brotherhood and its allies have been driven underground, greatly complicating U.S. efforts to maintain open lines of communication with the Islamist opposition.

With these realities in mind, the United States needs to rethink its approach in several ways: first, by establishing regular, and not just ad-hoc, channels of dialogue with Brotherhood and other Islamist activists inside and outside of Egypt and closely coordinating such outreach with the European Union. Second, the U.S. should raise the terrorist designation of the Brotherhood at the highest levels with our Saudi counterparts, stating both privately and publicly that attempts to eradicate the Brotherhood are counterproductive and call into question our reliance on Saudi Arabia as a counterterrorism partner.

While it is unlikely that the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization will turn to violence, a minority of Brotherhood members are increasingly using Molotov cocktails, burning

police cars, and attacking security personnel. Meanwhile, a larger—and growing—number of Brotherhood members and supporters have come to see their battle as not just against former Field Marshal Abdelfattah El-Sissi and the military, but against the entire Egyptian state, complicating prospects for any future reconciliation or re-integration efforts. These developments do not bode well for Egyptian stability and, by extension, regional stability. The exacerbation of these negative trends is not something the U.S. should simply stand by and accept out of deference to Arab allies.

### AN UNEASY START

From the beginning, relations between the United States and the government of Mohamed Morsi were plagued by competing narratives and misperceptions. This brief draws on conversations and interviews in Doha, Qatar, and Washington, DC, with senior Brotherhood officials; former and current U.S. and EU officials, including those who mediated between the Brotherhood and the secular opposition in 2013; and International Monetary Fund and World Bank representatives. What emerges are seemingly diametrically opposed narratives about the American as well as European roles in Egypt during those twelve months—a far cry from the Obama administration’s guarded optimism upon Morsi’s election in the summer of 2012.

With the Obama administration’s failure to “nudge” the military-backed government toward a more inclusive politics, it is time to reorder U.S. priorities in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Our policy toward Egypt cannot be separated from our approach to the Egyptian opposition, now dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Should the United States fail to effectively engage the Brotherhood

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, “A Coup Too Far: The Case for Re-ordering U.S. Priorities in Egypt,” Brookings Doha Center, September 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/09/05-us-priorities-egypt-hamid-mandaville>

and other opposition groups, it may again find itself unable to have constructive relationships with parties that rise to power in the future—just as it did in 2011.

After Mubarak fell in February 2011, the Brotherhood, as the country’s largest opposition group, was the most likely to take power in free elections. However, the United States had to start from scratch in building relationships with Brotherhood officials. Had the U.S. spent the preceding years, particularly after the first “Arab spring” of 2004–2005, developing meaningful contacts with Brotherhood activists and officials, this could have laid the foundation for more constructive relations as well as a clearer understanding of Islamist political behavior. But this did not happen.

Only in 2009 was the State Department’s Policy Planning staff given the green light to begin rethinking U.S. policy toward Islamist groups, particularly in Egypt. As one former state department official explains: “There was a sense that we weren’t getting this right. If we were to figure out how to build mechanisms of engagement with these groups, recognizing their growing and enormous political importance, that would be an important tool in potentially advancing U.S. interests.” Later, in 2010, the National Security Council undertook a review of U.S. policies promoting political reform in the region, one component of which was normalizing engagement with Islamists.

Yet, translating this into policy took time, and, with the unexpected demise of Mubarak, time was not on the Obama administration’s side.

### A LACK OF TRUST

The lack of sustained contact between the U.S. government and the Muslim Brotherhood during the thirty years of Mubarak’s rule resulted in a limited understanding of how the Brotherhood-led government would perceive

certain actions. One senior State Department official described relations as improving with almost all Brotherhood interlocutors—with the notable exception of Mohamed Morsi. Yet, the Brotherhood saw it differently, with a senior Brotherhood official telling me months after the coup that, “Essam al-Haddad [Morsi’s national security advisor] was the person [then-U.S. Ambassador to Egypt] Anne Patterson met with most. Essam never trusted Anne Patterson,” he said. “She came from Pakistan where a similar coup took place.”

In this respect, sustained engagement doesn’t just improve American understanding of Islamist groups, but, perhaps more importantly, it helps blunt the paranoia groups like the Brotherhood traditionally feel about U.S. influence in Egypt. As one former senior State Department official recounted: “The relationships were weak to start with. Much more on the side of the Brotherhood, there were huge prejudgments at play. We were eager to establish a positive relationship so we were not as critical as we could have been of actions that compromised the democratic process. But despite this, they were still distrustful.”

Relations with the Morsi government were also hindered by the U.S. government’s difficulty in dealing with Egypt’s “deep” state. If the Obama administration made an effort to engage and influence deep state institutions, that would have been perceived as a vote of no confidence in the actual, elected government. From the perspective of diplomatic protocol, American officials needed to treat the Morsi administration like it was the legitimately elected government. Even with the U.S. government’s sensitivity to this, the Brotherhood still feared a compartmentalized relationship, pointing to what they saw as the Department of Defense’s privileged relationship with the Egyptian military. In the months leading up to the coup, Morsi administration officials grew increasingly

concerned about the state's efforts to undermine the government. In one instance, a cabinet minister in the Morsi government recounted being in a foreign country at the same time as then Defense Minister El-Sissi: "I knew he was in the country conducting independent talks for weapons financing but no one told me about it, even though we were in the same cabinet."

### A CLASH OF NARRATIVES

In the aftermath of Morsi's overthrow, the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies tended to impose an order and logic on U.S. policies that may not have been there at the time. The United States, European governments, and international financial institutions saw themselves as engaging in good faith with rising Islamist parties. For the Brotherhood, though, the coup and the subsequent crackdown—which they saw as being possible only with the international community's support—cannot be separated from the preceding twelve months of Morsi's rule. Through the distorting prism of hindsight, the Brotherhood, always suspicious in any event, has come to interpret American actions in an increasingly negative, even nefarious, light.

A telling example of the clash in narratives concerns an incident in April 2013, when, in what international interlocutors saw as a good-faith effort to avert Egypt's impending political collapse, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton proposed that Morsi nominate a prime minister from the ranks of the opposition. Former Brotherhood officials and advisors to Morsi claim that there was pressure to appoint prominent liberal Mohamed ElBaradei as prime minister and recount specific conversations they had with President Morsi on the matter. However, EU special envoy Bernardino Leon, who was directly involved in the negotiations, denied this to me, saying: "It is not true. We suggested that there be a consensus prime

minister, not someone from the Brotherhood and its entourage and not from the [opposition] National Salvation Front. We conveyed this to Morsi and Morsi agreed in principle... El-Baradei was a non-starter." Whatever was said exactly, the Morsi government saw the EU's efforts as evidence of an international effort to undermine the presidency. As one senior Brotherhood figure told me, "This was a very rude interference in our affairs... Why impose a government that is led by an opponent of the government?"

Whether or not ElBaradei was mentioned, it is certainly the case that U.S. and EU officials pushed the Egyptian government toward greater inclusivity, seeing this as crucial to resolving the political stalemate. Morsi government officials would push back and tell their counterparts that they were asking for something they themselves would not do in their own countries. The Brotherhood would point to the common practices of established democracies—particularly those like the United Kingdom and the United States—in appointing party members to key posts. Their international interlocutors, meanwhile, would highlight the exceptional, fragile nature of Egyptian democracy. As a former State Department official pointed out: "As counterintuitive as it might have seemed to them, what they needed to do was throw the doors wide open. You need to take actions that demonstrate the opposite of what your critics perceive."

### POLITICAL CONSENSUS AND THE IMF DEAL

In the region, IMF and World Bank policies are often seen as an extension of U.S. and European policy. While the United States and European nations do have influence and can apply pressure, this perception assumes a level of policy coordination that is rarely there. An IMF deal, which could have unlocked as much as \$15 billion for Egypt (including associated



grants and commitments), failed to materialize during Morsi's rule. Again, the gap in narratives is striking.

As a former senior State Department official notes, "We were hugely supportive and encouraging of the deal... I cannot overemphasize just how badly everyone wanted the deal to happen." This is not how the Morsi government saw it: two figures close to Morsi who were privy to or actively involved in the negotiations find fault with the IMF and, by extension, the United States. One recounts that he was under the impression a deal was very close to done by early June, just weeks before the military coup: "We responded to all the prerequisites of the IMF... so tell me, what is the explanation for it not going forward? If the deal was signed then, it would have been very difficult for the coup to go ahead. The Morsi government would look very successful, having achieved something previous governments couldn't achieve."

The IMF saw it quite differently. There were still outstanding issues and growing concerns about the Morsi government's ability to execute the IMF program amid growing domestic opposition and plummeting public support. As the months went on, the IMF (as well as the U.S. and EU) increasingly came to emphasize the importance of political buy-in from opposition forces, including those, like ElBaradei, who the Brotherhood believed were trying to topple it. The Morsi government felt that it was being held to an unusual and unfair standard. In the IMF's Articles of Agreement, there is nothing about political consensus or inclusivity. Autocrats and democrats alike are eligible for an IMF deal. However, the IMF does care about a government's ability to implement economic reforms, and it was unclear if this was possible without the support of at least some in the opposition, especially if upcoming parliamentary elections dealt a blow to the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party.

Meanwhile, State Department officials privy to the ongoing discussions point to the Morsi government's reluctance to move on controversial provisions, particularly with parliamentary elections approaching. At the time, the Brotherhood saw the elections—and its still likely victory—as critical: things may have been bad, but after the polls, they would claim a renewed mandate and take bolder action on the economy and against the "deep state."

### U.S. POLICY MOVING FORWARD

Following the Brotherhood's electoral victories, the U.S. government was finally compelled to meaningfully engage with Brotherhood officials and then the Morsi government. But policymakers did not have the tools, understanding, or even the personnel to do so effectively. Herein lies the danger of a reactive policy; a pro-active, forward-looking (and admittedly risky) approach would have seen the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations recognizing what most knew: that the Muslim Brotherhood, in the event of a democratic opening, would rise to even greater prominence and perhaps even to power. As such, it made sense to begin serious, substantive engagement as soon as possible. That this would have angered the Mubarak regime should not have been prohibitive.

Of course, the question of how, or whether, to engage with a banned opposition group in an allied country is a sensitive one, and the United States now finds itself back at square one—or worse. Under Egypt's new military regime, the Brotherhood is now designated as a terrorist organization, something that was never the case under Mubarak. One EU official emphasized the importance of not going back to the way things were, when Western officials would avoid meeting with the Brotherhood out of deference to Mubarak. That said, in light of the Egyptian government's decision in December to designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, engagement will prove more challenging this time around.

1. **In light of the difficulties of meeting with Brotherhood members inside of Egypt, U.S. Embassy personnel should meet with legal teams representing imprisoned Islamist leaders and visit political prisoners when possible.** The Embassy should also expand its engagement and outreach to new groups not subject to the terrorist designation, such as Islamic charities and other affiliated youth groups.
2. **The U.S. can and should engage regularly with the many Brotherhood and other opposition figures currently in exile, primarily in Qatar, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.** Outside the media glare of Egypt's polarized politics, opportunities for meaningful engagement are likely to be more fruitful.
3. **The Obama administration should coordinate its engagement efforts with the European Union, including at the highest levels.** Given the Egyptian public's dissatisfaction with U.S. policy, meaningful engagement can be better sustained if it is done in close cooperation with European partners. The U.S. has said publicly that it will continue to meet with Islamists in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. As of now, there is no coordinated strategy in place for any kind of sustained engagement.
4. **While engagement is important in and of itself, at the very least for gauging political conditions on the ground, the U.S. should clarify the place of dialogue efforts in overall U.S. policy toward Egypt.** How does maintaining open communication with opposition actors—and perhaps even re-building a degree of trust—contribute to other long-term U.S. goals, including putting pressure on the Egyptian regime to move in a more inclusive direction and re-integrating opposition elements in the political process?
5. **The administration should more strongly push the Egyptian government to allow local and international civil society organizations the ability to work freely without fear of harassment, especially as elections near.** The absence of international groups, such as NDI, IRI, and Freedom House, has made it more difficult for the Embassy to provide needed assistance to networks of civic and political groups participating in the political process. Moreover, these organizations are an essential component of U.S. engagement with a broad spectrum of political actors. In meetings with Egyptian officials, the U.S. must more urgently communicate the need for such organizations to receive accreditation and to be allowed to work freely without government interference.
6. **The administration must make clear, privately and publicly, that harassment of Embassy personnel, including local staff, is unacceptable.** Following the security services' harassment and detention of locally employed staff in early 2014, the U.S. government should secure clear assurances from the Egyptian government that these groups will not deter Embassy staff from meeting with political actors in the future. Unless serious consequences are articulated to the Egyptian government, local Egyptian citizens will likely be more reluctant to assist the Embassy for fear of retaliation.
7. **The administration should more clearly articulate its Egypt policy to congressional leaders and work to ensure that members of Congress traveling to Egypt do not undermine U.S. interests on those trips.** During a visit to Egypt in September, Congresswoman Michele Bachmann (R-MN) said: "We've seen the threat that the Muslim Brotherhood posed around the world. We stand against this great evil...We remember who caused 9-11 in America." Such conspiratorial comments distract from

the administration's message and provide fodder for incitement in Egypt. While some disagreement on policy between the executive branch and Congress is inevitable, the Administration should work with congressional leadership in both parties to at least avoid this type of provocation.

- 8. The administration should state publicly that counterterrorism efforts in the region should not be politicized, and that counterterrorism assistance provided to regional allies can only be directed toward actors mutually recognized as terrorist groups.** The United States should also raise the terrorist designation of the Brotherhood

at high levels with Saudi counterparts, explaining that attempts to eradicate the Brotherhood are not only unrealistic but also detrimental to U.S. national security and run the risk of weakening longstanding counterterrorism cooperation.



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