



PERSPECTIVES

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Halting the Egyptian Drift

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Developments in post-Mubarak Egypt are beginning to mirror the process of Islamization that took place in Iran following the 1979 revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood is gaining support, while progressive forces – those that hoped to bring democracy to Egypt – have fallen silent. It may be up to a third party to prevent Egypt from becoming the next Iran.

One wonders if Egypt today is on the road to becoming another post-Shah Iran. After the fall of the Shah in the 1970s, Iran's progressive forces became passive, leaving the great Persian civilization at the mercy of far more anti-democratic elements than the regime they had fought against. The pattern developing in Egypt in the wake of the "Arab Spring" looks more or less similar. With the fall of the relatively modern Mubarak regime, anti-social and anti-modern elements, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, are gaining strength and popularity.

A case in point: Egyptian Islamic theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi was welcomed back to Egypt after a 50-year hiatus and a 30-year ban from leading weekly Friday prayers. Best known for his program *ash-Shariah wal-Hayat* ("Shariah and Life"), broadcast on Al Jazeera and Islam Online, Qaradawi has long played a prominent role within the intellectual and spiritual leadership of the Brotherhood. His obscurantist philosophy, support of terrorism, and advocacy for killing the Jews have been judged so harmful – socially, economically and culturally – that countries such as the US and the UK have prohibited him from entering. Even many Muslim academics in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the Palestinian territories have condemned him for giving sacred Islam "a bad name."

Since the Muslim Brotherhood is now the single largest political group in Egypt, with an estimated 600,000 members, all other groups that matter in the country's politics have started rallying behind it to secure their eventual share of the national power cake. The Brotherhood was initially part of the Coalition of Young Revolutionaries, which led the protests against President Mubarak at Tahrir Square. However, after toppling the dictatorship, the more progressive members of this revolutionary alliance – the Qatar-based Academy of Change, former International Atomic Energy Agency Chief Mohamed El-Baradei and his associates, Egyptian women activists, etc. – have become marginalized, now playing second fiddle to the rising Islamist group.

Consequently, those who, until recently, praised the fallen Mubarak have suddenly aligned themselves with the Brotherhood. One such example is Sheikh Ahmad Mohamed al-Tayeb, the Imam of the al-Azhar Mosque – one of the most important Sunni religious centers. Sounding like a radical jihadist, Tayeb recently branded the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden an act of American "piracy" and called his burial at sea a "moral crime" that was "against Islamic law." He has also asserted that the main cause of terrorism is Israel's existence and actions as well as Western countries' attempts to "dominate the Arab world." Such statements are likely to help the Brotherhood garner critical Sunni support in Egypt's upcoming parliamentary elections.

Another individual who appears to have joined the Brotherhood bandwagon is former Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa. Various reports suggest that Moussa and the Brotherhood have reached an understanding whereby the Brotherhood will not field a candidate against Moussa in the elections, enabling him to win the presidency. In return, Moussa will rubber-stamp all legislation passed by the Brotherhood bloc (perhaps a majority bloc) in parliament.

The Muslim Brotherhood's work towards creating an Islamic state in Egypt closely resembles Ayatollah Khomeini's overhaul of the Iranian political system post-1979 Revolution. The Brotherhood shares a common ideology with the Iranian clergy – to promote Islam not just as a religion but as a belief system governing all aspects of political, economic and social life.

There is genuine concern that once the Brotherhood manages to establish itself within the country's political system, persecution of both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities will grow. There have been, of late, increased attacks on the Copts – a Christian sect that makes up roughly 10 percent of the Egyptian population – by Islamic extremists. While previously subjected to persecution of various kinds, they have begun to feel far more frightened in the post-Mubarak era.

The Supreme Council of Armed Forces, led by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, could play a critical role in halting the Brotherhood's momentum. Because of its relatively modernist nature and orientation, it already holds the trust and goodwill of the country's

silent masses. The Council could use this type of platform for combating the lack of democracy and development that has caused the recent unrest in Egypt.

Currently the de facto ruler until parliamentary elections are held, the Council should take advantage of its position to promote progressive leadership based on pluralism, non-violence and democracy. Simultaneously, the Council could make serious efforts to improve the country's social sector.

According to a recent Moshe Dayan Center study, the population of Egypt (83 million in 2009) is growing by about 1.8% a year and that of working age by 2.2%. But there has been little employment generation. Some 40% of its population today earns an income of \$2 per day or less. Over 87% of Egyptian households have an annual income of less than \$1,000. The inflation rate in 2010 increased by 12% and food prices specifically rose by 20%. Hundreds of thousands are living in graveyards and in other substandard accommodations. Furthermore, the current regime has not invested properly in education, with over 30% of its adult population being illiterate.

Social reform efforts could give a significant boost to the strength and popularity of genuine progressive democratic forces in Egypt. Given its strategic and economic interests in the region, the West could join the efforts of the Egyptian Council by invoking some kind of Marshall Plan, such as that which was adopted by the US in 1947-1951 to assist the rebuilding and economic regeneration efforts in war-torn Europe.

However, given that anti-Western attitudes run very strong in the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular, outsiders will have to be very careful when planning any such economic stimulus so that it indeed benefits the have-nots in Egypt. Aid that is not properly monitored will only benefit the corrupt and alienate the public, and provide anti-democratic forces with ammunition for a takeover.

But, alas, we must also humbly take note: The ability of Westerners to influence domestic outcomes in the Arab world is ultimately quite limited.

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