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MEI Policy Essay

Egypt: Diplomacy and the Politics of Change

Robert Bowker

Pressure for change at all levels — individual, family, and state — preceded the 2011 Arab uprisings. It will continue, driven by inexorable factors including demography, education, Internet-based connectivity among like-minded groups, wage-based employment of women, and changing business models.¹ The following analysis of the Egyptian case provides a background for understanding Egypt's challenges in the wake of President Mohamed Morsi's July 2013 ousting and the military's takeover.

Consider this example of changing realities. A young, female Egyptian university graduate working successfully in the information and communications technology sector, merchant banking, or advertising, with peer-reviewed performance evaluation and achievement-based rewards, is experiencing for the first time, like some others of her generation, the realization of her creative potential amidst the demands of a competitive global marketplace. She will not take easily to expectations that she should reconcile herself to authoritarian values, dictated by others, when she leaves the office in the evening.

Demands for justice, dignity, and government accountability are the product of such cumulative forces of social change. These forces represent a paradigm shift in the Arab world in favor of popular political empowerment, from which no state ultimately can remain immune. Although change is a phenomenon that may be delayed, and perhaps even reversed from time to time, it will not easily be denied.

For the present, however, the values that underpin the authoritarian character of pedagogy and education, sustain gender imbalances, and support patriarchal family models remain the bedrock structural factors in both the social order and the political systems of the Arab world. Arab leaderships may pass their expiration date, but the systems from which they arise live on.

Except perhaps in Syria and Libya, where the corrosive social and political impact of armed conflict has been extreme following the Arab Spring, states remain stronger than civil society. Although their political authority has weakened since 2011, Arab states remain the primary mediator between civil society and world society.

Arab governments will therefore continue to determine how far, and in what ways, other governments, organizations, and individual parties may be part of the process of change in justice and accountability. They will be resistant to unsolicited advice. They

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1. Robert Bowker, *Egypt and the Politics of Change in the Arab Middle East* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2010).

will mostly be offended, not persuaded by criticism, well-intended or otherwise. This is not to argue against making such criticism, where avoiding double standards of values demands it, but rather to be aware that doing so may have unpredictable effects.

Many Western governments have significant foreign policy and security interests at stake in the outcomes of the unfolding debate concerning the civilizational benchmarks of Arab societies. They would wish their values to be respected, and hopefully admired, in the emerging Arab world. The same is true of the ambitions and concerns held among leaders of conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf. In the latter case, however, the values Gulf leaders wish to prevail and the interests they seek to pursue are very different.²

In the volatile political environment of the years following the Arab Spring, external parties associated in Arab minds with ‘the West’ and seeking to participate in shaping an intricate, multidimensional Arab playing field, do so at their peril. This is the case even where change has begun taking place from within Arab societies, and where reform of traditional values and practices, with regard to human rights, has long been recognized as overdue by Arab intellectuals. The most important risk to avoid, particularly by many Western countries, is that of causing political disadvantage to reformists within Arab countries who advocate the values most Western countries would wish to see prevail, not only in regard to constitutional and ideological issues, but also in regard to human rights values.

EGYPT AND THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

Against that general background, the contest of values unfolding in Egypt is of far-reaching importance. A generation of Egyptian activists whose aspirations were shaped by the experience of 2011 and now, the events of 2013, must define their relationship with a government in which regressive forces are poised once again to play a significant political role. Although they will continue to demand a voice in matters affecting their lives, those who wish to promote reform agendas, including the reform of internal security practices, will face significant countervailing forces at the political and the institutional level.

Most Egyptians welcomed former president Husni Mubarak’s fall. They celebrated the courage and tenacity of their role in securing his departure. Aside from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist elements of the Egyptian population, much the same can be said of those who participated in the overthrow of the Morsi government. But among the most significant consequences of the events of the past two years has been an almost irredeemable polarization within Egypt between Islamists — those who engage in politics and identify themselves through an Islamic discourse — and those who eschew being identified in that manner.

Egyptians in general are socially conservative, depending to some extent on variations in socioeconomic status. But now with experience of inept, and for many, alarming, rule by the Muslim Brotherhood firmly in mind, most remain to be convinced that a full-blown parliamentary democracy remains preferable to rule by a strong (but just) authoritarian leader. For many, also, the ideology of the leader may matter less than the quality of government performance in meeting material concerns.

2. Marc Lynch, “Money to Meddle,” *Foreign Policy*, July 11, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/11/money_to_meddle_saudi_arabia_uae_qatar_egypt.

Ordinary Egyptians are also skilled at adapting to political and economic dysfunction. They are wary of changes from the familiar. Despite the changes in lifestyles, values, and expectations of many of the younger generation, there remains for most Egyptians a dearth of credible role models in society, politics, and business, who present convincing evidence that paradigm shifts in those areas are both underway and deserve to be welcomed.

The highly contested political space which lies ahead for Egypt will be filled with ambiguities and uncertainties about what it means to be simultaneously Egyptian, Arab, Muslim, and modern. As Egypt enters into a new, and in many ways more chaotic political era, Egyptians will have to decide the extent to which they support the preservation of constitutional values, including the separation of powers between parliamentary, executive, and judicial spheres. The degree to which Egyptians support constitutional values will have effects on the decisions that have yet to be made about the place of the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders and supporters, the trials of the former elite and favored parts of the middle class, and the special status of senior members of the military and security apparatus.

While an electoral process secured the Muslim Brotherhood's position as the key political force in Egypt in 2012, the transition from military rule under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to civilian government was shaped in many respects by the nature of the accommodation reached with SCAF over its future role, responsibilities, and interests.

Attempts by SCAF during 2011 to circumscribe the Brotherhood's authority were firmly rejected, even as concerns grew in SCAF about the rising political influence of the Brotherhood's Salafi rivals, and doubts were raised about the capacity of the Brotherhood to deliver on its side of an (alleged) understanding that an Islamist-dominated parliament would not intrude into the military's security role and business activities. The Egyptian judicial system also sought, but ultimately failed, to constrain the Brotherhood's political agenda.

With the removal of Morsi and the decapitation of the Muslim Brotherhood, the political circumstances of the military and civilian political forces have reversed. It is now the reform-minded civilians, the judiciary, and remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood who will be seeking to preserve their interests, prerogatives, and visions for Egypt, while the military considers the degree to which such concerns should be recognized and given practical effect.

In addition to the concerns and factors mentioned above, 2011 saw a shift among Egyptian Salafis from a primarily religious stance to one in which political activism was the norm. The Nour Party, the Salafi Hazim Abu Isma'il, and other Salafi parties and popular identities proved second only to the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party in their capacity to mobilize media attention and votes.

With the departure of the Muslim Brotherhood from the political scene for the moment, at least, and the arrest of most of its senior leadership, the Salafi side of the Egyptian political spectrum has been granted an extraordinary political opportunity to garner electoral support at the expense of the Muslim Brotherhood; and shape policy according to its ideological disposition and strength on the ground. The military and incoming government cannot avoid at least demonstrating some responsiveness to Islamist demands if they wish to be seen as inclusive of all political currents other than the Brotherhood, and avoid adding to allegations from Islamists that the new order in Egypt is anti-Islam.

Consequently, the revision of the suspended constitution, the referendum, elections due to follow; along with the establishment of strong and well-targeted economic reforms are shaping up as major tests of the capacity of the Egyptian military and the interim government to simultaneously contain the polarization within Egyptian society and politics; to protect the security of the state; and to maintain a positive and constructive relationship with the secular and non-Islamist opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood.

But as was the case during 2012, any political and social space opened to the Salafis — including opportunities to shape policy in such areas as social issues, education and women in more conservative directions — will be of concern to those who remain skeptical of the political intentions of the military. There is also a possibility of erosion of the enabling systems — press freedoms, religious freedoms, the separation of powers between the judiciary and the executive, equality of empowerment, etc. — upon which an effective democratic system would depend.

Despite the injection of financial support from the Gulf, the Egyptian military must also address as a high priority the fundamental economic issues and distortions that its predecessors have struggled to overcome.³ By any measure, a stringent reform program — especially in regard to the winding back of energy subsidies — will have to be instituted if Egypt is to find its way back to sustainable economic growth.

A military-backed government, however, will not have the political legitimacy, let alone a political mandate, to insist on the robust economic policies that Egypt's parlous circumstances demand. In June 2011 the military overruled moves toward a deal with the International Monetary Fund, ostensibly because it believed funding cuts could cover the budget deficit,⁴ but almost certainly because of fears about the expected political reaction to the IMF financial package.

Moreover, if it should choose to avoid the conditionality of IMF assistance and turn instead to the Gulf states for support, Egypt's sovereignty will be mortgaged to countries whose visions for Egypt's future are far removed from the expectations of many of those among whom the 2011 and 2013 uprisings originated. And although the immediate promise of \$12 billion in financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait following Morsi's removal⁵ has placed negotiations with the IMF aside,⁶ that relief will be temporary at best.

As Egyptians begin to move on from the events of July and August, there is a risk of political and policy paralysis, reflecting substantial ideological and material differences between the Egyptian military, the anti-Islamists, Salafis, and the remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood themselves, which would cause further damage to an already distressed and vulnerable Egyptian economy. The continuation of emergency security and interim political arrangements may restrict, if not altogether nullify, the influence of reformist voices.

3. Farah Halime, "Egypt's Ticking Time Bombs," *Rebel Economy: Rebuilding after the Arab Spring* (blog), April 23, 2013, <http://rebeleconomy.com/economy/egypts-ticking-time-bombs/>.

4. Alexandre Goudineau, "IMF and Egypt: No News is More of the Same," *Egypt Independent*, April 22, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/imf-and-egypt-no-news-more-same>.

5. Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, "Gulf States Embrace Post-Brotherhood Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, July 10, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/gulf-states-egypt-muslim-brotherhood.html>.

6. Ulf Laessing and Maggie Fick, "Egypt's Interim Government Gets to Work amidst Protests, Deadlock," Reuters, July 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/16/us-egypt-protests-idUSBRE96E01E20130716>.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood also faces major internal challenges. Even if they manage to survive the attempts of the military-backed government to dissolve the group completely, eventually accept the revisions the suspended constitution envisioned by the military, and choose to participate in the elections that will follow, the Brotherhood may not be capable of overcoming the structural factors behind the group's recent demise.

The Brotherhood's leadership style and values, like those of other Egyptian political and social institutions of long standing, have long been strongly hierarchical and authoritarian. Its period in government was characterized by incapacity to share power and draw upon the skills and experience of those beyond their immediate power base.⁷ Whether that situation arose out of hubris and a narrowness of vision at the leadership level, or because its opponents refused to be part of a coalition-building approach the Brotherhood claimed to seek, is now of little consequence. It is most unlikely the Brotherhood will be presented again with an electoral path to power.

At least for a few months, and especially if their senior leadership remain incarcerated, the Brotherhood and its supporters will probably remain firmly ensconced within a comfort zone of oppositional politics.⁸ But if the Brotherhood remain focused on survival and organizational discipline, and on highlighting the injustice of its recent experience, there will be little inclination toward, or opportunity allowed, for reflection and self-criticism about how opportunities were lost to channel the institutional power of the state to its advantage.

Rhetoric aside, the Muslim Brotherhood would appear unlikely to risk its self-destruction through organized acts of violence. Islamists have been deprived in both Egypt and Algeria of what they could claim to be legitimate electoral success. The Muslim Brotherhood may ultimately be driven underground, and the rejuvenation of al-Qa'ida in Syria and elsewhere in the region ought to be of concern should jihadis return to Egypt in force. But despite certain dismal similarities,⁹ Egypt is not yet facing a situation comparable to Algeria in the 1990s. Although the Sinai Peninsula is shaping up as a possible exception to that situation,¹⁰ and in Upper Egypt the military has shown limited commitment to asserting its authority, since August the internal security apparatus has been reinvigorated, and its operational tempo has increased markedly.

The Muslim Brotherhood's sense of historical determinism would encourage pragmatic adjustment on its part to changing political circumstances, and the limited extent of politically-linked violence in 2011 and 2013 suggests there is little appetite among the organized opposition to depart from that approach. The US and most other Western governments see their inclusion in Egyptian politics as necessary, even if many

7. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "The Muslim Brotherhood after Morsi: Can the Brothers Reboot?," *Foreign Affairs*, July 11, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139571/carrie-rosefsky-wickham/the-muslim-brotherhood-after-morsi>.

8. Steven A. Cook, "Echoes of Nasser," *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/07/16/echoes_of_nasser_egypt_muslim_brotherhood_history.

9. Robert Zaretsky, "Egypt's Algerian Moment," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/20/egypts_algerian_moment_sisi_black_decade.

10. Amr Nasr El-Din, "And Then There Was Sinai," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Sada, Middle East Analysis*, July 11, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/07/11/and-then-there-was-sinai/geqa>.

Egyptians do not.¹¹ But such logic may not be the final determinant of the Brotherhood's approach, nor may it be able to exercise the level of discipline over its supporters that a strategy of according primacy to political survival would require.

ARAB AND WESTERN RESPONSES

There is very little that Western governments can do to promote or pursue their interests directly in regard to the outcome of debate about the constitutional and societal values of the new Egypt. Should Western governments decide their interests in Egypt are worth pursuing, they have no option but to work in cooperation with Egyptian government institutions and to deliver their ideas, experience, and material assistance in close cooperation with Egyptian authorities.

The results likely to be achieved through such cooperation will vary. It is a highly political process, always likely to be shaped by externalities, personalities, and budgets. Acceptance of the prerogatives of sovereignty (on both sides), while calibrating the closeness of the relationship according to the quality of dealings, provides the only basis for each side to arrive at a reasonably durable balance, under any given circumstances, between its various interests and objectives, and those of its counterpart.

Additionally, the challenge of fostering a society which is not only adaptive but also progressive will require creative interaction on the frontiers between the global and the local in Egypt and the Arab world in general. It is in this context, framed by the impact of populist politics, globalization, and regional strategic developments — and such crosscutting influences as gender and consumerism — that the debate about external engagement with Egypt must be considered.

Egyptian reformers have largely failed at representing themselves within Egypt as a core part of a progressive Arab social and political structure. They risk being stigmatized, especially by Egyptian audiences insecure about their place in a globalizing world and feeling vulnerable to global, Western-oriented external forces. Also of concern is the more recent tendency to demonize the United States as the most convenient object of execration for both the Islamist and secular trends within Egyptian society.

The trend towards Salafi pietism within Egyptian popular culture; rejecting the normative environment of the secular Arab state; and drawing on horizontal linkages to like-minded, non-state actors in the Gulf and elsewhere for guidance and support is likely to continue. Celebrity Salafis in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait enjoy strong popular followings in Egypt. Egyptian civil society organizations linked to the Salafis, notably al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya and Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, all appear to have received substantial funding from Saudi, Qatari, and Kuwaiti sources.¹²

11. Bassem Sabry, "How Morsi, Brotherhood Lost Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, July 4, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/morsi-brotherhood-lost-egypt-bsabry.html>

12. *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, "Five Salafi Organization Officials Referred to Trial in Foreign Funding Case," *Egypt Independent*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/712291>. In 2012, officials of the second largest Salafi NGO, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, were under criminal investigation for receiving almost \$66 million from NGOs in Kuwait and Qatar between January 2011 and March 2012. See, WikiLeaks, "Salafism on the Rise in Egypt Cairo 00000202 001.2 of 004," *Telegraph*, February 15, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/egypt-wikileaks-cables/8327088/SALAFISM-ON-THE-RISE-IN-EGYPT-CAIRO-00000202-001.2-OF-004.html>.

If they were to withdraw from cooperation with the military there is little reason to doubt that the Nour Party and other Salafi elements would attract financial and moral support from non-state elements in the Gulf that are fundamentally antagonistic toward secular and liberal Arab forces they regard as instruments of the West. At the popular level there is sympathy for the view that the Egyptian military is guilty of a betrayal of Islam.¹³

Leading Saudi Salafi figures such as ‘Awad al-Qarni, Salman al-‘Awda, and Muhammad al-‘Arifi chose, initially at least, to remain low-key contributors to the debate following Morsi’s removal. They were wary of the consequences of acting against the clear preferences of those within the Saudi government who were pleased to see the Muslim Brotherhood fall from power. But other Salafi figures, such as Nabil al-‘Awadi and Tariq al-Suwaydan in Kuwait, strongly backed Morsi, and an increasing numbers of Saudi intellectuals are also voicing their support.¹⁴

A key challenge from a Western perspective is to look beyond the pressures and frustrations of the moment in order to support Egyptian efforts to reshape their society in this complex environment in ways which will promote democratic constitutionalism and inclusiveness as core values. Those are values that may emerge over time as important parts of what progressive-minded Egyptians regard as part of being both Arab and modern. If these values are to emerge, it will be conditional upon Egyptians building much higher levels of mutual understanding and respect. These values will have to be generated by Egyptians themselves.

Weighed against that process will be the determination of conservative Arab governments, at the forefront of which are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to see that neither popular empowerment nor Islamic states without monarchies will be part of the Arab future. In that respect, they share a great deal of common interest with the Egyptian military. Whether and in what ways Qatar, too, might try to return to its previous pro-Islamist agenda — and the Saudi reaction to any such moves — can only be guessed at. But it should not be assumed that the Egyptian-Saudi honeymoon will endure for long after Egypt returns to civilian rule. Mutual antipathy at the popular level between Egyptians and Saudis is deep-seated, and attempts by Gulf states to impose conditionality — political, financial or otherwise — upon aid packages are likely to be rebuffed.

It is unrealistic for external parties to expect political leadership, communication skills, and vision of a high order in defense of progressive, but painful economic and political reform amid a bitter contest over Egypt’s political values and direction; especially when the notion of globalization is regarded with deep suspicion in Egypt and most other Arab countries.

Moreover, where external parties, often concerned for important but more narrowly-focused or politically-driven issues — such as the empowerment of women and the emergence of a critically aware and politically potent Arab civil society — seek to urge and support such reforms, they are at risk of complicating the process whereby those issues can be addressed on their own merits within Egyptian society.

13. Marc Lynch, “Gulf Islamist Dissent over Egypt,” *Middle East Channel* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2013, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/18/gulf_islamist_dissent_over_egypt.

14. “Hundreds of Saudi Intellectuals Sign Pro-Morsi Statement of Support,” *Middle East Monitor*, July 13, 2013, <http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/6560-hundreds-of-saudi-intellectuals-sign-pro-morsi-statement-of-support>.

This is not meant to argue against Western countries attempting to help Egyptian reformers make a difference. But it is of vital importance — especially in the light of developments in August 2013 — to solicit and reflect carefully on advice from those reformists regarding the means by which they believe their objectives might best be accomplished. If external parties are to have a positive and constructive influence, even indirectly, it will only be under circumstances in which all parties involved on the Egyptian side feel they are in control of their choices and are gaining something from the process.

Balanced against the overarching need for Western governments to do no harm are the arguments and, in some quarters, political pressure to use forms of leverage, including in the case of the United States, military assistance, to underscore the strength of their concerns. The argument can be made that \$75 billion in US military aid and decades of other incentives in the form of development assistance and financial support did nothing to address the shortcomings of Egyptian political and social life under Hosni Mubarak. Nor did US military assistance significantly enhance regional stability during the Mubarak or SCAF eras. Some areas changed for the better, particularly in terms of economic reforms, and Egypt remained aligned with the West, but underlying Egyptian values did not.

For their part, many Egyptians tend to see aid as an entitlement within a partnership based upon respect for Egyptian sovereignty (especially where Western countries are concerned).¹⁵ In the case of the United States and the Gulf Arab states, aid is also seen as an affirmation of Egypt's regional stature and an acknowledgement of the centrality of Egyptian stability to other countries' interests and in the security of the region.

Reduction of US military aid following Morsi's ousting would have negative bilateral repercussions and almost no positive impact on domestic conditions in Egypt. Nor would it have much effect on US interests where Israel is concerned. There may be threats to delay US military overflight and Suez Canal transit arrangements, but giving effect to such threats would signal a drastic change in US-Egyptian relations, which would not seem to be where the Egyptian military wishes to go. Dealings between Israel and Egypt in regard to Sinai and the Gaza Strip will continue to be managed between their respective military forces and intelligence agencies because it is in their respective national interests to do so. Whereas some of the Egyptian military's commercial interests linked to the defense assistance program would suffer if the US cut off military aid, the impact would be borne mainly among US defense suppliers and their US-based production facilities.

Suspension of military assistance to Egypt may be used to fan an incremental increase in popular contempt for the US. However, the factors driving such antagonism are complex and deep-seated, and ultimately beyond the capacity of military assistance programs to affect. To a very considerable extent, for example, the secularist bitterness towards the US for its perceived sympathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood is a reflection of the polarization of Egyptian society that no amount of external advice or pressure will change.

The policy choices confronting the US should therefore be based mainly on consideration of their wider effects on the interests and values that the US position promotes and the perception of those values in Egypt and beyond.

15. Mohamed Yonuis and Ahmed Younis, "Egyptian Opposition to U.S. and Other Foreign Aid Increases," *Gallup*, March 29, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153512/Egyptian-Opposition-For-ign-Aid-Increases.aspx>.

The US policy approach to Egypt can be calibrated to some extent. For example, military training programs in the US should remain open to Egypt so as not to lose contact with upcoming generations of military officers, as unfortunately happened in Pakistan. On the other hand, if the US reaction to excessive use of violence against civilian demonstrators in Egypt is limited to rhetoric, the message to Muslim populations around the globe will be that the US is prepared to discriminate among governments committing human rights abuses according to whether or not the victims are Muslim. A reduction in military assistance to Egypt on the other hand would add some long-lost credibility to US claims to be nondiscriminatory in upholding human rights principles, even when those being subject to such abuses are ideologically opposed to the United States.

The message to other Arab governments conveyed by a failure to act would also be clear: the responses from the Western world to human rights abuses can be managed. Demonstrators in Bahrain, Yemen, the eastern regions of Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere may be subjected to repression by such means as their governments deem necessary.

Some forbearance may be warranted while Egypt searches, amid declamatory populist rhetoric, for a new equilibrium in its dealings with the US. But rejection of US counsel without consequences, among which a suspension or reduction in military aid would be a natural part, further diminishes respect for the US in the region. Such bilateral effects as may arise with Egypt pale in comparison to the political, foreign policy, and strategic risks of allowing such perceptions in the Middle East to grow unchecked.

Condemnatory rhetoric without action is an orchestra without instruments. It could render democratic rights and values irrelevant to the region's future. It also leaves the US on the wrong side of history because, as mentioned earlier, the drivers of change toward empowered Arab societies will continue.

Leaving aside the issue of military assistance, pressure also rightly exists on Western governments to be firm in support of well-regarded Egyptian civil society organizations and individuals, especially at this critical moment in the political history of the region. There is a need, in particular, to redress the decision by the previous Egyptian government to prosecute Egyptian and foreign staff of prominent and widely respected US-backed NGOs accused of interference in Egypt's political affairs under the guise of strengthening the capacity of Egyptian political parties participating in the widened political space created by the downfall of the Mubarak regime.

The full consequences of the decision to try some of those involved in the NGO activities, and their subsequent convictions, including the damage caused in Washington and Cairo to the US-Egypt relationship, were largely disregarded at the time on the Egyptian side, in a lather of political self-righteousness.¹⁶ All sides lost, materially and morally, in the debacle which followed.

It would be a mistake as a matter of principle, and in terms of the well-being of the individuals concerned, to leave that situation unresolved ahead of the restoration in due course of high-level political engagement between Egypt and the United States. That will be no easy task, however, nor will it be possible to revisit the issue in the near term.

16. Fayza Aboulnaga, "Why Egypt Moved against Unregistered NGOs," *Washington Post*, March 10, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-egypt-moved-against-unregistered-ngos/2012/03/05/gIQAeHrf1R_story.html.

The acrimony of public and private commentary on the United States is unlikely to dissipate for years to come, complicating any progress toward securing a change in approach on the Egyptian side. The process of rectifying the injustice done to the Egyptians, Americans, and others involved will present opportunities for spoiler roles to be played against the political authority of the military and of the government established under its protection. Should the convictions be overturned, there will be voices from disgruntled nationalist opinion claiming to be more robust than the military in defense of Egyptian sovereignty and resistance to external pressure.¹⁷

Looking ahead, a balanced approach would avoid — as far as the political reality on both sides allows — exacerbating the sound and fury of the immediate circumstances of the relationship with Egypt. It would concentrate instead on maintaining and expanding a longer term program of capacity-building, especially, but not exclusively, beyond the Egyptian military.

Lowering the temperature of political debate and recrimination on all sides would provide more potential for Egyptian civil society to operate effectively and, over time, to foster values of accountability and inclusiveness. Raising the temperature of the debate about aid in the current circumstances of Egyptian society however would be more than likely to serve the political interests of those most likely to stifle worthwhile reform and social progress. It would be all too easy to unintentionally provide more ammunition to those who seek to discredit or weaken progressive reformers who are already targeted because of their association, real or imagined, with external players and their alleged agendas.

The best avenue for the promotion and pursuit of US interests in Egypt remains engagement aimed at increasing Egyptian and Western exposure to the experience and aspirations of each side through strengthened institutional interaction, such as education links through organizations in good standing such as AMIDEAST; people-to-people contact; and commercial, scientific, and technical cooperation.

By any measure, engagement with Egyptian society by the United States has been neglected, lagging well behind programs with countries arguably of lesser significance to the future of the Arab world and Western interests in that context, and beyond. There were, for example, only around 2,000 Egyptians studying in the United States in 2011, compared to more than double that number from Kenya, and almost 10,000 from Nepal, and 100,000 from China.¹⁸ Egypt is not among the top 20 recipients of US economic (nonmilitary) aid, and Western development assistance to Egypt is at risk of declining.

Overly generous funding of civil society organizations and partner agencies is not the answer to fostering new values, even if such funding were permitted by governments suspicious of the motives behind such programs. But helping to strengthen basic capacities in such as areas as health, nutrition, water management, agricultural research, and business management, including in some cases through cooperation with Arab and other multilateral development assistance programs, will foster the conditions under which Egyptians may, in due course, address those issues themselves.

17. David D. Kirkpatrick and Steven Lee Myers, "American Defendants Leave Egypt Amid Growing Backlash," *New York Times*, March 1, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/world/middleeast/travel-ban-lifted-american-defendants-have-yet-to-leave-egypt.html>.

18. "Open Doors Regional Fact Sheet Africa 2011," *Institute of International Education*, 2012, <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Region/~media/Files/Corporate/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-2011/Region/Africa%20Region%20Fact%20Sheet%202011.ashx>.

The next few years will be challenging so far as engagement with Egypt is concerned. By increasing the positive and constructive exposure of civil servants, educators, intellectuals, and other opinion-shapers to the values and behaviors of a wider range of Westerners beyond the often tawdry imagery of the tourism sector; and perhaps bringing closure to the collective memories of the indignities suffered by Egypt at the hands of outsiders, a more balanced appreciation of respective strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations may develop on all sides.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the dramatic and ultimately tragic events of July and August 2013, there is considerable potential for things to continue to go wrong, both for Western interests in Egypt, and for Egypt itself. A populist, chaotic political period lies ahead, with elements of xenophobia even closer to the surface of political discourse than during the Mubarak era.

The promotion of Western interests will be more complex in a society rife with political and sectarian divisions that show no sign of healing. External parties will have to work, perhaps for an extended period, with successive Egyptian governments that may lack widespread popular support and may lack legitimacy in the eyes of a significant proportion of the population.

Diplomats will need to keep channels of communication open to all sides within Egypt, despite the challenges, both practical and political, which sustaining that approach has always entailed. Some Western governments may conclude that Egypt is more akin to Myanmar on the Mediterranean than a flawed but aspiring democracy; a few will probably reduce the scale and quality of their engagement with Egypt accordingly and direct scarce resources elsewhere. That would be a mistake. A strong signal should be sent in regard to military assistance. But enabling Egyptians to engage distinctively, confidently, and effectively with world society remains the means by which the forces for change in Egypt can best be accommodated and used for the benefit of all Egyptians.

Westerners should not lose sight of the fact that the desire to engage with world society among the younger generation of Egyptian activists is strong. It will continue to grow because the fundamental drivers of change in Egypt, as in most of the Arab world, are unstoppable.

The risk — for the next few years at least — is that the capacity to fulfill young Egyptian activists' desire to interact with the international sphere may be circumscribed by a failure of political leadership to counter the determination of the Egyptian elite to preserve its privileges, and by the influence of those regressive forces which have surged to prominence by seizing political opportunities in the post-uprising period. But Egypt's future as a nation rests in its own hands. Its success or failure will come down to issues of political leadership, vision, and courage. Interesting times lie ahead.