

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Cautious Optimism on Egypt

by Jon B. Alterman

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Everyone expected Egypt to be working out better by now, especially Egyptians. Spending a week in Cairo earlier this month, there was barely a whiff of the euphoria of early 2011, when the country united to bring down the government. Even so, there is an energy in Egypt that wasn't there before. Egypt's "new normal" isn't quite normal, but it still gives cause for optimism.

That may seem a strange thing to say, because few Egyptians are especially optimistic. Immediately after Hosni Mubarak's downfall, loose talk about the supposed \$70 billion embezzled by the president and his family led many to believe that the end of Egypt's problems was nigh. Repatriation of those funds, and plugging the leaks in the economy that had let the ruler amass a fortune, would soon make Egypt a middle-income country, they thought. Ending the corruption that had enriched Mubarak's entourage would free billions more.

Yet, there were no billions to be found. Money has become harder to come by rather than easier, as wealthy Egyptians stash funds overseas and foreign investors cautiously wait for a clearer political picture. Foreign tourists are also waiting for a clearer picture before they return in large numbers, and the police remain a shadow of what they once were. Strikes seem to be a daily occurrence. Altering multi-billion dollar subsidy programs without devastating tens of millions of Egypt's poor will take years to do; repairing the rest of the rot in the Egyptian economy will take years more.

Politically, the seemingly endless cycle of elections and referenda that began shortly after Mubarak's fall have not let up. Many more rounds are to come. To the consternation of many, the Muslim Brotherhood's political prominence seems likely to be a permanent feature of Egyptian politics. Not only are their organizational skills and discipline unsurpassed in Egyptian life, but they seem to be the only institution that emerged from 60 years of authoritarian rule with a sophisticated political sensibility.

The Brotherhood's governing skills have been somewhat less impressive. President Muhammad Morsi made a litany of promises for his first 100 days, but

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Back to School

What do Harvard, Columbia, and UCLA have in common? They are among the top campuses welcoming burgeoning cohorts of Middle Eastern students. In 2010-2011, the number of students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region studying in the United States jumped by 23.8 percent over the previous year, to 47,063.

After the 9/11 attacks, the number of Middle Eastern students who came to study in the United States dropped sharply. By 2003-2004, only 17,240 came to U.S. institutions. More relaxed visa restrictions, U.S. governmental and non-governmental support for more exchanges, and the enthusiastic support of Arab governments have helped turn the numbers around. For the academic year 2010-2011, Saudi Arabia and Iraq experienced the greatest rise in U.S.-bound students from the Middle East, with 43.6 and 45.6 percent increases, respectively. Libya saw an increase of more than 40 percent. Numbers diminished for Israel, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Governments are investing in greater exchanges in order to boost regional economic prospects and cross-cultural understanding, but exchanges alone cannot address the deficiencies in regional educational systems. Preparation in sciences and engineering remains a weak spot, and while many of the exchange students concentrate on applied subjects, the same is not true of their counterparts at home. Still, the upward trend is a positive sign for the health of U.S. higher education and for prospects that tomorrow's leaders in the Middle East might draw on a deeper well of international experience. ■ AE

CSIS Conference on The Maghreb in Transition

On October 12, 2012, the CSIS Middle East Program convened a conference entitled "The Maghreb in Transition: Seeking Stability in an Era of Uncertainty." The conference sought to highlight the evolving political, economic, and security dynamics of this region. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered the keynote address, imparting her optimism for the region overall as well as her concern for the preservation of recent gains in freedom and civic participation in the face of the violence of some extremist groups. The conference brought together a senior group of experts from government, academia, policy research, and the business community to share their insights. Video and audio from the conference can be found [HERE](#). ■

according to the independent “Morsi Meter,” he was able to fulfill just over 15 percent of them and make progress on another third. New government officials continue to make rookie errors, and veteran officials wonder about their own futures. Meanwhile, the economy is still ailing, and a deal with the International Monetary Fund—which all agree is an essential foundation for economic recovery—remains elusive. The saga of creating a new constitution continues to drag on, with colorful disputes grabbing headlines amidst uncertainty over whether the current constituent assembly drafting the constitution will ever finish its work or be pre-empted by the president appointing his own committee.

And yet, amidst all of this is good news.

The biggest part of the good news in Egypt is that no group is under the illusion that it can govern alone. Whatever its electoral strength—some of which is comparative rather than absolute—the Brotherhood understands it needs a coalition to rule the country. Further, it appears to have concluded that liberal and independent voices make more durable political partners than the other religious parties, which by their nature challenge the Brotherhood’s religious legitimacy. This dynamic began to play itself out in parliament before it was dissolved, and it continues to play itself out in the constitution-writing process. There is no Islamist supermajority.

The Brotherhood has also proven cautious in its dealings with the military. The headlines in August were over the dismissal of Field Marshall Hussein Tantawi, Chief of Staff Sami Anan, and Director of General Intelligence Murad Muwafi, but closer observation suggests that the military has returned to its traditional role more than it has suffered a defeat. Egyptian policy toward the United States and Israel, which was the foundation of the U.S. relationship with the Egyptian military, has changed only modestly. The elected government seems to have little appetite for taking on the United States, Israel or the military itself.

Economically, the government needs all the help it can get, and it has sought allies rather than enemies overseas. Closer to home, there have been no massive expropriations or nationalizations. Anti-corruption prosecutions have been limited to the highest echelons of the former regime. Tellingly, there is no massive exodus, among businessmen or anyone else. Panic seems absent in Egypt, and virtually all Egyptians seem to feel there is a possibility that they will be able to protect their interests in the new order.

Even the dysfunction in the constitutional drafting process has its silver lining. A swift and bold constitution process that deeply engaged the public would almost certainly polarize the population and set off pitched political battles. The more drawn out and uncertain process Egypt is undergoing now holds out the prospect of grudging acceptance with less risk of violence.

Almost all of Egypt’s problems still lay in front of it, and some seem insurmountable. Yet, among the most dangerous outcomes of the last 20 months would be a process in which a large swath of Egyptians had concluded there was no way politics could meet their needs, and their only options would be to take up arms or leave the country. That has happened in neighboring countries, but it has not happened in Egypt. Instead, expectations have been lowered and timelines expanded.

Political tensions in Egypt are not a sign of failure, but rather a sign that politics are working. Politics, after all, are about juxtaposing contrasting views as much as about unifying a constituency. Even more important, the defining characteristic of a democratic system is not people’s willingness to win. Instead, it is their willingness to lose, because they have faith that they just might win the next time.

Many have lost in Egypt. So far, they are behaving like democrats. Their legitimate concern is that the winners behave like democrats, too. ■ 10/22/2012

Links of Interest

NPR quoted Jon Alterman in “[Signals from Iran Indicate Willingness to Talk.](#)”

Secretary Clinton’s address at the conference on “The Maghreb in Transition” was [widely quoted and discussed](#) in the press.

Television host Emad Adeb interviewed Jon Alterman in a segment titled “[The Political Scene Now](#)” (Arabic) on CBC Egypt.

Reuters quoted Haim Malka in “[Analysis: Obama, Netanyahu both find themselves in a tight spot.](#)”

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