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Disengage in Egypt: Take Neither Side as the Country Collapses into Violence

Dead protesters litter the streets of Cairo. So much for Secretary of State John Kerry's theory that Egypt's military rulers "were restoring democracy." Unfortunately, the dead will have trouble voting in the new and improved Egypt.

Instead of acting as the regime's enabler, the Obama administration should "reset" relations with Cairo. The U.S. should cut off all aid and withdraw America's ambassador. If Washington has any influence to exercise, it should do so quietly and informally.

U.S. policy toward Egypt has rarely taken the Egyptian people into account. The \$75 billion provided in "aid" over the years was mostly a payoff to successive dictators and their military praetorian guards. All that Washington worried about was "stability."

The armed services became a privileged caste, with sons following fathers into the military. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces controls as much as 40 percent of the economy, causing the generals to worry more about personal privilege than national security. Observed the *Economist*: "combat is perhaps [the military's] least-developed skill."

However, after the police were unable to quell protests against Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the army abandoned the dictator in an attempt to save the system. SCAF ruled until last year's presidential election, which came down to a contest between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Ancien Regime. Secular liberals demonstrated little support.

The run-off featured the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi against Mubarak's last prime minister, Ahmed Shafik. Many Egyptians viewed Morsi as the lesser of two evils and gave him a narrow victory. Reports circulated -- well-sourced but

impossible to verify -- that SCAF had intended to proclaim Shafik the victor, but backed down after the Brotherhood threatened to expose the vote fraud.

The Brotherhood is no friend of liberty but its membership broadened after the movement emerged from underground, when it was persecuted by successive dictators. Morsi had an opportunity to establish his organization's democratic bona fides. Alas, little good came from his brief term in office. He made few economic reforms, expanded his powers through decree, presided over rising persecution of Coptic Christians, and failed to reach out to disaffected Egyptians who only reluctantly voted for him.

Yet Morsi's opponents were no better. The International Crisis Group criticized them for "Viewing election results as altogether meaningless, demanding oftentimes disproportionate representation in decision-making bodies; challenging the basic principle of popular will; and yielding to the growing temptation of extra-institutional means, be it street agitation or calls for judicial or military intervention."

Moreover, the Mubarak state remained largely intact and obstructed Morsi at every turn. The police disappeared from the streets, allowing crime to surge; they even refused to protect the Brotherhood's headquarters from mob attack. Mubarak-appointed judges tossed out the elected, Islamist-dominated legislature.

Fouad Ajami of the Hoover Institution noted that "The feloul, the remnants of the old regime, still had the commanding heights of the economy." Anti-Morsi businessmen and officials may have helped manufacture debilitating electricity and gasoline shortages. After pledging loyalty to Morsi, Gen. Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi worked with the Tamarod movement, which organized the massive demonstrations used to justify military rule.

It would have taken extraordinary skill, forbearance, and luck, none of which President Morsi possessed, to have succeeded. Had the opposition simply waited, Morsi would have discredited political Islam -- democratically. In this way, argued Reuel Marc Gerecht of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies: "The Egyptian military may have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory."

Instead, Morsi's disparate opponents backed SCAF in staging the July 3 coup: the president removed, his top aides arrested, his movement's media shuttered and journalists arrested, the president and others charged with fanciful offenses, and his supporters gunned down in the streets.

Certainly it was an odd way to go about "restoring democracy." David Kramer, Freedom House's president, cited a "significant decline in most of the country's democratic institutions" after Morsi's ouster.

What the al-Sisi government actually restored was the old Mubarak structure. The military, "long a cancer on Egyptian society," in Gerecht's words, regained its preeminent political role. Gen. al-Sisi selected a Mubarak jurist as acting president. The regime appointed 25 provincial governors, of whom 17 were military generals, two were police officials, and two were Mubarak judges.

The Interior Ministry reestablished its special departments devoted to monitoring political and religious "extremism." The discredited police, who fought for Mubarak until the end, returned to their posts. Overall, reported the *Washington Post*: "Egypt's new power dynamic, following the July 3 coup that ousted Morsi, is eerily familiar. Gone are the Islamist rulers from the once-banned Muslim Brotherhood. Back are the faces of the old guard, many closely linked to Mubarak's reign or to the all-powerful generals."

Egypt's liberals sought to ride to power atop army tanks. The Coptic Christian minority hoped to shelter for protection behind those same tanks. Yet the Mubarak-era institutions and officials jailed and tortured liberals and persecuted and oppressed Copts. The latter groups are likely to find that they are nothing more than helpless adornments for Western view.

Unsurprisingly, the Brotherhood resisted the military's demand for abject surrender: stop protests against the coup with no guarantee of meaningful political participation in the future, let alone the prospect that a future election victory would be honored. The movement's only leverage came from being on the street. In fact, the Brotherhood was in a similar position in 1954 when it backed protesters who demanded that the government, recently taken over by Gamel Abdel Nasser, institute democracy and release political prisoners. Nasser promised elections and the demonstrators went home. Nasser then targeted opposition forces, including six Brotherhood leaders who were executed.

The military regime seemed similarly determined to destroy the Brotherhood. Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), sent to Egypt as an envoy, said: "You could tell people were itching for a fight."

And Gen. al-Sisi and his fellow generals chose violence over conciliation. Reported the *Washington Post*:

Two weeks before the bloody crackdown in Cairo, the Obama administration, working with European and Persian Gulf allies, believed it was close to a deal to have Islamist supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi disband street

encampments in return for a pledge of nonviolence from Egypt's interim authorities. But the military-backed government rejected the deal and ordered its security forces to break up the protests.

The military government acknowledged over 600 dead, and the toll almost certainly was much higher. There were reports of police dressed as civilians shooting to provide a pretext for security forces. Many of the killings appeared to be deliberate. Abigail Hauslohner and Sharaf al-Hourani reported for the *Post*: "government forces were unleashing sniper fire that seemed indiscriminate. Along with scores of Morsi supporters, those who were felled included two journalists and the teenage daughter of a prominent Brotherhood leader." Sherif Mansour of the Committee to Protect Journalists decried the "systematic" targeting of the press: "We haven't seen in Egypt's history this many attacks against journalists.

The slaughter in Cairo sparked more violence nationwide, including Brotherhood attacks on government buildings and Coptic churches. These actions were horrid and wrong, but not surprising: the authorities were killing civilians and the Copts were backing the authorities. Indeed, Coptic Pope Tawadros II had appeared on the stage with Gen. al-Sisi when the latter announced Morsi's ouster.

In the near future the army has the advantage. Civilian mobs have joined the police and army against protestors. The Brotherhood's resistance, demonized by a captive media largely supporting the coup, has won the group few friends.

However, the movement is well-organized nationwide. It survived prior attempts at suppression. Pollster Shibley Telhami argued that President Morsi overestimated the Egyptian people's Islamic identity, but "now, with their violent repression of the Brotherhood, the generals who ousted Morsi risk underestimating it." After all, the Brotherhood is closer to the average Egyptian than the liberals, secularists, and Christians backing the coup. Argued Gerecht: "the Westernization of the Egyptian poor has been in retreat for more than 40 years."

By suppressing the Brotherhood, killing demonstrators, and closing political space to Islamists the government is encouraging the rise of a more radical and violent leadership. Angry younger members may now challenge more moderate leaders or join more combative splinter groups. *Financial Times* columnist David Gardner warned: "Driving the Brotherhood back underground, alongside harder-line Islamist activists still trying to outflank them, is an assured recipe for prolonged bloodshed." Indeed, the head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was radicalized when as a member of the Brotherhood he was imprisoned and tortured during a prior crackdown. Continuing civil disorder is almost certain, with violence "likely to become a constant feature of Egyptian life and politics," warned Eric Trager of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Terrorism may follow, targeting government officials and facilities, Coptic churches, and tourist sites. Islamists fought a similar campaign against the Mubarak dictatorship two decades ago. The ICG pointed to attacks by

Islamic radicals (not the Brotherhood) in the Sinai against government security forces as "equally ominous signs of possible deterioration toward low-scale insurgency as disenfranchised citizens lose any remaining trust in the political process."

Sen. Graham (R-SC) worried that Gen al-Sisi was "going to create an insurgency for generations to come." Iraq offers a frightening, if thankfully less likely, specter for the future. Full-scale civil war in Algeria following the military's suppression of Islamists on the verge of electoral victory in 1992 also claimed tens of thousands of lives.

In any conflict there will be little room for liberal and democratic values. Nor does Gen. al-Sisi seem to hold these values. He is said to view himself as a "man of destiny" and Sen. Graham found the general "a little bit intoxicated by power." In 2006 Gen. al-Sisi wrote a paper while studying at the U.S. Army War College which, reported Trager, reflected "Mubarak's obsession with preventing Western pressure to democratize."

The Obama administration ignored U.S. law requiring an aid cut-off after a coup because it wanted to preserve its "leverage." Unfortunately, by refusing to end assistance the administration demonstrated that the Egyptian government can do anything, except, perhaps, attack Israel, and the money will still flow. Which means America has no leverage. Only by ending assistance will Washington regain any leverage -- still likely to be minimal, with Persian Gulf states having pledged \$12 billion for Cairo.

Despite having provided \$75 billion over the years Washington has consistently demonstrated its impotence in Cairo: The administration wanted to preserve the Mubarak dictatorship, urged President Morsi to govern more inclusively, objected to the army coup, urged the military regime to include the Brotherhood in its political roadmap, and opposed the bloody crackdown. Washington has been reduced to begging the military to promote reconciliation and provide a speedy roadmap back to democracy. One unnamed official admitted to the *New York Times*: "what we say might not be part of their calculus."

To show its displeasure the administration delayed the delivery of F-16s, which Egypt can live without. The president also announced cancellation of an upcoming joint military exercise, which the Egyptian military might have been too busy to join. Although U.S. officials apparently are reconsidering some assistance programs, the administration still resists ending military aid. "We are continuing to review our posture and our assistance to the Egyptians," said White House spokesman Brian Roberts. Yet even Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations admitted after the crackdown that "it is clear that the U.S. has no leverage at all."

The strongest argument for continuing assistance is to buy, or at least rent, the services of the Egyptian military: don't go to war with Israel, fight extremists in the Sinai, and continue to give the U.S. preferential Egyptian overflight and Suez Canal transit rights. However, the generals won't take on Israel because they would lose, which would wreck the armed services. Israel also could punish Cairo if it failed to control terrorist activity from its own territory.

Cairo has announced that it is "reviewing" its strategic relationship with Western governments, including the U.S. Washington could end up paying a price for doing the right thing, but here it has leverage. The administration could respond to retaliation by ramping up its public condemnation, denying spare parts for existing U.S.-supplied military equipment, blocking loans from the multilateral development banks, hindering Egyptian imports, discouraging tourist travel to Egypt, encouraging allied action against Cairo, and suggesting international criminal charges against Egyptian leaders for their brutal conduct. The generals would quickly find that they also have a stake in the bilateral relationship.

More than Egypt is at stake. James Traub of the Center for International Cooperation noted that "silence has consequences too." Denying political Islam a place in democratic systems will not eliminate the movement, but instead force it to operate in violent ways. Said Daveed Gartenstein-Ross of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies: "al-Qaeda's narrative is furthered, as Ayman al-Zawahiri's dark predictions about Egyptian politics seem to be proven correct."

The carnage in Cairo mimics that in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. To subsidize Cairo today is to underwrite murder. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kent.) asked of his colleagues who voted to continue providing aid: "How does their conscience feel now as they see photographs of tanks rolling over Egyptian civilians?"

President Barack Obama said that the violence "must stop." But the generals cannot back down since a resurgent Brotherhood could exact revenge. And the Brotherhood cannot yield since the regime seems determined to destroy the organization.

Washington's best policy is to support neither side. The U.S. should end all financial and military aid and get out. America should leave this tragic conflict to the Egyptian people.