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Of Mosque and Military

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On February 11, 2011, after 18 days of massive, nationwide protests, Egyptians forced the resignation of their president, Hosni Mubarak, after twenty-nine years of authoritarian rule. But in the future, as in the past, [the United States will continue tipping the scales in its favor](#)^[3], putting its eggs into the military basket in addition to that of the protesters. Given the uncertainty over how things will shake out, and the impact of Washington's track record with Cairo, the United States—for better or worse—must step back and finally allow Egyptians to shape their own destiny.

Months after the phenomenal display of euphoria, courage, and self-determination, some in the West are wondering whether the defenders of Egypt's uprising have much to be happy about. The soft transfer of power from Mubarak to the armed forces seems to have signaled Egypt's drift into a [dictatorless tyranny](#)^[4], with the military continuing to crackdown on protesters and subjecting them to military tribunals. Meanwhile, the religious extremists who [recently killed](#)^[5] over half a dozen Israelis had entered Gaza via Sinai. These developments are extremely worrisome. And yet, there is also a danger that the West will continue to back a deeply entrenched and well-organized military that over the past several months has been making overtures to the Muslim Brotherhood. Like Pakistan, another U.S. "ally," Egypt—and its many less conservative factions—appears stuck between [the mosque and the military](#)^[6].

Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)—the country's 19-member military body that took over after Mubarak's downfall—has an incentive to play up the power of Islamists for the West. That is not to say that Egypt's Islamists aren't powerful, or that the SCAF cannot make common cause with the Brotherhood for its own narrow self-interests. The [military, often run by retired generals, commands](#)^[7] an array of commercial enterprises in industries such as water, olive oil, cement, construction, hospitality, and gasoline. Because the Brotherhood looks poised to [win big](#)^[8] in the upcoming parliamentary elections, [SCAF has every incentive to cooperate now with the B](#)^[9]rotherhood.

On this note, it should be said that the Brotherhood, while religious conservative, intolerant of dissent, and—despite its recent rhetoric—still [hoping to establish an Islamic state](#)^[10], is not the most extreme element in Egyptian society. There is also the [Salafist Nour Party](#)^[11], [Jamaa Islamiya](#)^[12], and [other Salafist groups that seek to go mainstream](#)^[13]. Moreover, it's important to

point out that not all religious elements oppose the liberal protesters: the country's most prominent religious clerics, al-Azhar, supported the liberals [14] and their principles on the constitution.

Still, the danger remains that the United States might try to use its leverage with the military to the detriment of protest groups. This could lead to a slew of dangerously counterproductive and unintended consequences. Consider, for instance, Mubarak, who Washington backed for nearly 30 years to the tune of \$1.5 billion annually [15] and \$28.6 billion from USAID since 1975 [16]. He used the Muslim Brotherhood as a pretext to crush moderate, reform-minded critics. Indeed, American diplomats at one time even conceded that Mubarak [17] was using the "implicit threat of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise" to "temper foreign pressure for more and faster democratic reforms."

Unfortunately for Washington, Mubarak's efforts emboldened the more radical elements of the Brotherhood. For example, in 2007 the government enacted a series of constitutional amendments, one of which—aimed directly at the Brotherhood—banned any party with a religious orientation from registering to run for office. But as Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy write [18], the unintended consequence of Mubarak's effort was a shift in the Brotherhood's internal balance of power: reformers were discredited and the power of hardliners increased. Many also blame the movement for the quiet Islamic revivalism [19] pulsating through mainstream Egyptian society. As John Esposito writes [20], "The Muslim Brotherhood exemplifies the quiet social revolution that has been taking place in Egypt's cities and towns."

Part of the problem, as Scott Atran wrote [21], is that when secular opposition forces had a meeting in a café, the government could have shut down the café; however, "the authorities could never go into mosques and shutter those, so the Muslim Brotherhood survived." Indeed, as one U.S. diplomat divulged [22], Mubarak "systematically and 'legally' eliminated virtually all political opposition, leaving only the Muslim Brotherhood standing." Dynamics in Egypt stand in sharp contrast to Tunisia, where despite former President Ben Ali's repression of internal dissent, the moderate al-Nahda Party, not the radical Salafist movements, appear to be the most popular. Thus, while systematic oppression has the potential to make Islamists stronger—a sort of "survival of the fittest"—that is not always the case.

These facts are relevant to present developments in Cairo, including the current debate over Egypt's new constitution. Noha El-Hennawy [23] and Eric Tragnor [9] recently wrote about these issues at length; both make for an exciting read for those interested in the political battle underway among Islamists, non-Islamists, and the military.

Going forward, Washington's policy options are limited. Throwing money around for political influence could easily backfire, especially if, given SCAF's cooperation with the Brotherhood, U.S. aid is given with the expressed intent of "advancing" U.S. interests and countering forces opposed to U.S. interests.

Whether or not it was premature for many in the West to back Egypt's uprising is up for debate. What is not is the extent to which previous efforts by Mubarak and the military actually helped—inadvertently or not—strengthen Islamists. We must remember that one of the most misleading justifications for Washington's tacit acceptance of Mubarak lied in the realm of ideology. In fact, America's unrelenting hostility toward Islamist forces like the Brotherhood, albeit rational, often obscures the extent to which U.S.-backed tyrannies and police states can penalize moderation and foreclose avenues for peaceful opposition.

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