

COMMENTARY

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Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: Perception and Reality

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Those who draw hasty conclusions that an Egypt led by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) will soon become an Islamic state fashioned after Saudi Arabia or the oppressive regime in Iran neither appreciate Egypt's uniqueness nor its storied history. It is one thing to criticize the MB for their public anti-American and anti-Israeli pronouncements when they were an oppressed group in dire opposition to the Hosni Mubarak regime, but it is an altogether different matter now that they rule the country.

For the MB to stay in power and ensure their success when new legislative elections are held, they must adopt a balanced foreign and domestic policy and strive to change the outside world's perception of their hardcore Islamic polity. Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, knows that he must face reality and focus on economic development, avoid adventurism by preserving the peace with Israel and maintain good relations with the United States. This political realism still remains consistent with Morsi's professed desire to assert Egypt's role and independence. He insists that while Egypt will not be hostile towards the West, and in particular the US, it will not be as compliant as it was under Mubarak's leadership, while restoring Egypt's sui generis leadership in the Arab world.

Egypt is composed of a multi-faceted uniqueness that has no parallel among the other Arab states. Egypt has the largest Arab population (nearly 80 million), a cohesive and predominately Sunni population with only one significant minority (Coptic Christians) and stands apart from the tribal-based and/or sectarian societies plagued by sectarian strife like Libya, Syria, Iraq and

Bahrain. Moreover, Egypt has a long and continuing history that stretches back nearly 5,000 years, which instils pride in Egyptians and an unmatched historical perspective about themselves as a people. All along, Egypt's political continuity was based on a pharaonic orientation which has centred on strong leadership, particularly on display in the contemporary tenures of Mubarak, Anwar Sadat and Gamal Abdul Nasser. In addition, while the political dynamic has changed in Egypt, there remains a powerful desire to see strong and effective leadership emerge from the revolution as long as it strives towards meeting the premise of revolution- in particular political freedom, human rights and economic development. Lastly, Egypt's traditional leadership role in the Arab world stems from its extraordinarily rich culture cultivated over thousands of years and its traditional role as leader of the Arab states, a home for the Arab League and a regular host of Arab summits.

Despite being located at the heart of a tumultuous region, Egypt does not have any external enemies. The Gaza Strip represents no threat as Egypt exerts significant influence over Hamas, it does not face any threat from its chaotic southern neighbour, Sudan, and enjoys peace with Israel. Although there are some voices in Egypt who suggest that the peace treaty with Israel should be modified, Egypt's current government remains committed to maintaining the peace treaty which has served its national interests and acted as an anchor for regional stability. Moreover, the peace with Israel ensures Washington's continuing economic and military aid and political support, which no Egyptian government, regardless of its political leanings or religious beliefs, can forsake.

In addition, portraying Israel as the culprit behind Egypt's ailments as past governments have done in an effort to distract the public's attention and cover up for its past and present shortcomings will no longer work. Indeed, the MB knows all too well that throughout the revolution the ire of the people was directed towards the Mubarak regime, not Israel or the US. The public demanded freedom, adequate social services, and justice that can no longer be drowned out by invoking Israel as the cause of Egypt's malaise. Moreover, though the Egyptian military still remains a powerful institution, it has no reason or motivation to challenge Israel with whom it has had collaborative relations. On the contrary, President Morsi would like to build on the accord with Israel by finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which will not only end the conflict but also further enhance Egypt's stature and strengthen regional stability. In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, President Morsi linked the peace treaty with Israel to the American commitment to Palestinian self-rule. It is that history, traditional role and existing reality that will govern Egypt's President to pursue a balanced policy in conformity with the unmitigated reality of Egypt.

Although Israel has every reason to suspect the MB's intentions, particularly based on past maligning and criticisms of Israel by MB leaders, it would ultimately be prudent of Israel to change its perception of and approach towards the MB. Israel must face reality and employ the

policy of “respect and suspect” by giving the MB the opportunity to prove themselves. While Morsi and the MB are attempting to place Egypt on a new path, their rise to power makes it imperative as stated to face reality as well: Israel is not a reality they can wish away. While the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East and Arab upheavals may take decades to settle, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be wished away and neither Egypt nor Israel can wait it out. Thus, both countries under the MB leadership have a historic opportunity to work together to bring an end to the conflict.

Notwithstanding the relationship between Hamas and Iran or the collapsed ties between Hamas and Syria, Hamas, more than any time before, depends on the MB, of which it is an offshoot, for political and strategic support. Recent unrest in the Sinai Peninsula has provided the MB with an opportunity to reign Hamas in to a more moderate position towards Israel and avoid any provocation. Indeed the MB, as I was told by a high Egyptian official, does not wish to choose between aiding Hamas against Israel or leaving Hamas to Israel’s whims in case of a violent conflict between the two sides. Either situation will place the MB in an extremely difficult bind.

For this reason, the MB advised Hamas to keep a low profile and to moderate its position towards Israel and exerted pressure on Hamas to forsake violence as a tool by which to achieve its political objectives of destroying Israel and establishing a Palestinian state in its stead. The MB, however, will be more eager to play a more active and direct role, especially if Israel makes some good-will gestures towards the Palestinians such as the release of prisoners, easing the blockade on Gaza and declaring a temporary halt on the settlements’ expansion while crediting the MB as the player behind such Israeli moves.

Although the Egyptian government under Morsi’s leadership certainly hopes to carve an independent path in order to project itself as a renewed regional leader and not merely a conduit for US or Western interests, Morsi also knows that Egypt’s economic, political, and military well-being depends on the continued direct and indirect support from the US. To demonstrate his independence, however, and to the chagrin of the US, Morsi decided to attend the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Tehran. While there, however, Morsi used his appearance at the summit to publicly lambaste Syria as an “oppressive regime,” which amounts to an indictment of Iran’s cynical support for the Assad regime. Morsi’s decision to make his first international trip as President to Saudi Arabia should further allay some concerns about the MB government as it gives another indication that Morsi and the MB are more likely to join the Arab moderate camp that seeks a comprehensive peace with Israel based on the Arab Peace Initiative.

The revolution in Egypt has instilled a definite sense of freedom on the part of the public, who even after the fall of Mubarak filled Tahrir Square demanding (with emphasis) economic development, better education, improved health care and the chance to live a meaningful life with dignity. The day-to-day dissatisfaction in Egypt, however, remains endemic as the economy

continues to be plagued by gross inefficiencies that further aggravate mass poverty and high unemployment.

Since Egypt still relies on global financial sources such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in addition to loans from Saudi Arabia and the US, it is virtually impossible for the MB to take any course of action that dramatically deviates from Western “prescriptions” or goes against the spirit of Egypt’s revolution. Now that the public has the courage and knows effective methods of taking to the streets and protesting, it will be able to topple any government that fails to deliver on its promises.

The unparalleled story of Egypt was on stark display throughout the course of its revolution, which was the shortest in length, relatively less violent, and caused the powerful military apparatus to be upended and sidetracked. The MB knows that Egypt’s future and its leadership role will ultimately be determined by meeting its domestic needs and the desire to remain an anchor of regional peace. Thus, maintaining good relations with both the West and the wider Arab/Muslim world while seeking an Israeli-Palestinian peace to further Morsi’s domestic agenda will become central to the success of the MB’s governance.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir’s web portal. Link: http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-perception-and-reality/?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=c6a1717937-UA-5963141-2&utm_medium=email

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