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THE REGION: PASSIVITY IN THE FACE OF ISLAMISM

Barry Rubin

[Jerusalem Post](#), June 3, 2013

A colleague wrote me the following thoughts: “As the expert on this issue, may I pose a question to you? I accept the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood is messing up in Egypt - that they are suffering a credibility gap between promise and performance. But could this not also be positive in that in the process political Islam itself gets discredited? You would recall the Islamist Revolution heralded by Hasan al-Turabi in Sudan. However when I [met some of them], Turabi’s own students [were] critical about the Islamist revolution and indeed told me there should now be a division between state and faith. Could a similar development not happen in Egypt?”

This is a clever point, and it could certainly happen. Yes, by mismanaging Egypt’s affairs the Brotherhood could become unpopular and be voted out of office. To put this idea another way: Might despair be moderation’s best friend? There are examples of such a phenomenon right now in Egypt: An anti-Islamist media now exists to point out this discontent, though the opposition’s power is sometimes overestimated. The mistaken lesson of the 2011 Egyptian revolution at the time was that a lot of people protesting or voting equals democracy.

Yet power balances still matter. The old regime only fell because the old ruling elite wouldn’t save it due to exhaustion and factional conflict. The new Islamist ruling elite won’t make that mistake, at least for decades to come. A recent poll shows how Egyptians are becoming understandably gloomy over the situation.

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Now Egypt faces a huge economic crisis. The country has only about two months' reserves to pay for imported food. Where is it going to get the around \$5 billion a month it needs to pay this bill? A proposed loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that would pay for one month or so is being held up by the Egyptian government's refusal to sign the deal because the IMF's conditions require cutting subsidies, and cutting subsidies on food could lead to massive riots.

Westerners generally believe that repression and suffering lead to angry responses by the masses. Yet institutions can control the situation, propaganda reshapes beliefs, repression stifles opposition. Moreover, in Third World countries, a predominantly poor people can - because they know they have no choice in economic, political and social terms - put up with a lot more unhappiness and suffering than do middle class Americans or Europeans who have the leisure, information, freedom, and luxury of acting (albeit not necessarily effectively) on even minor complaints.

In short, dissatisfaction in Egypt doesn't necessarily mean change. Despair usually leads to passivity. If the last revolution failed or was disappointing are people going to want to mobilize for another one? Isn't the message that politics don't work or the forces making the mess are too strong? Thirty-four years after Iran's Islamist revolution a lot of despair has only led to two peaks of moderate activity there. The first was co-opted (the Khatami presidency which achieved nothing), and the second was put down through repression (the 2009 Green Movement after the regime stole an election).

The Arab nationalist regime in Egypt lasted for almost 60 years and involved a lot of suffering and four lost wars (Yemen, and against Israel in 1956, 1967, and 1973). By the time the Brotherhood is discredited it will be far more entrenched in power and therefore harder to remove. Perhaps future elections will be fixed, or not even held at all. The Brotherhood will, for example, control the court system in future - this is currently its highest priority - and thus can guarantee electoral

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victories. By then, repression will set in deeper, discouraging open dissent. Much of the time it is true that the heavier the penalty for speaking out, the fewer who will do so. Even if you have a lot of discontented people on your side it is not easy to moderate, much less, overturn an Islamist dictatorship.

Speaking of Iran (and this is quite interesting), in the past, especially in the 1990s, it was argued that the visible failures of Iran's revolution would discourage other countries from having Islamist revolutions, and at the time that did seem quite logical. Around the year 2000 the Islamist movement was widely considered to have failed. Yet disastrous precedents don't necessarily discourage revolutionary Islamists, who simply claim, "We can do it better." And it doesn't mean the masses necessarily will not believe them, especially since Islam is such a passionate, powerful force.

If the highest goal of the Middle East peoples is democracy, freedom, human rights and material progress, the argument that these forces will triumph might be plausible. But is that in fact true? Just because people in the West think that way doesn't make it accurate. Ideological enthusiasm and religious passion may carry the day rather than the everyone-wants-their-kids-to-get-a-better-life-as-their-top-priority school believes.

Not every parent celebrates their kid becoming a suicide bomber, for example, but a large number do. And even though they might be angry about the children being misled by demagogues, they know well enough not to speak publicly about it. Attacking a Christian church also lets off a lot of steam, as does blaming the Jews. Many people give up, thinking (or knowing) that there is no real road immediately visible for transforming their societies into prosperous and democratic ones. Others benefit materially by supporting a dictatorial regime. The government better ensure that one of these groups are military officers.

It is also often true that outside observers look at every specific development in

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isolation, ignoring the revolutionary rulers' ideology and blueprint. With the armed forces apparently determined to be passive, there is only one effective institution holding back the Brotherhood: the courts. Judges appointed under the old regime are largely secular, and many of them showed pro-democratic independence even under the Mubarak dictatorship. One way or another, however, the Brotherhood is moving toward replacing the judges by forcing them into retirement. And then the regime will name its own judges, who will interpret things the way the Brotherhood likes as well as putting a very high priority on making Sharia the law of the land. The same process will be happening in the schools, mass media, religious and other institutions, finally reaching the entrance and promotion of Brotherhood sympathizers in the officer corps....

Indeed, it is very sobering to consider the Sudan, my colleague's example of anger at an Islamist government leading to moderation. While the extreme Islamists did become discredited there eventually, the process took almost 25 years. Even today, the country is under an authoritarian dictator. And it is very significant to note that Sharia law largely continues to rule the country. The current Sudanese dictatorship, which has been credibly accused of genocide against black Africans in the south, merely uses the pedestal provided by the Islamist predecessor. On its behalf, the Muslim clerical association has just called for jihad against anti-government rebels.

Egypt is a more advanced country than Sudan and the Islamists there are badly split. There are now four main Islamist parties in Egypt. Yet they can also work together and are all pushing in the same direction. The moderates are still weak even if you add in all the other non-Islamists (including radical nationalists and leftists). And the opposition to Islamism is more fragmented than the Islamists, lacking even an ideology or program....

Thus, while anger and despair are going to rise in Egypt these factors are not in themselves enough to bring down a regime. Unless the army is convinced that the country is going to fall apart - and perhaps not even then - the Brotherhood is going to be in power for a long time. And that also applies to everywhere else

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Islamists are ruling - in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Tunisia, Turkey, and perhaps soon in Syria.

The writer is the director of the Global Research in International Affairs (Gloria) Center.

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EGYPT'S SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

Eric Trager

[*Real Clear World*](#), May 29, 2013

Due to a moribund economy, fuel and food shortages, and a lack of political opportunities, Egypt faces a tumultuous summer, and conditions will likely continue to deteriorate thereafter. While Washington should encourage Cairo to undertake necessary political and economic reforms that might calm the situation and improve governance, the Obama administration should concentrate on preserving vital strategic interests in the event of renewed upheaval.

Since Egypt's 2011 revolution, persistent political uncertainty and plummeting domestic security have undermined foreign investment and harmed the country's once-vibrant tourism industry. According to the Interior Ministry, the past year has witnessed a 120 percent increase in murders, 350 percent increase in robberies, and 145 percent jump in kidnappings. Foreign currency reserves dropped from approximately \$36 billion at the time of Hosni Mubarak's ouster to \$14.42 billion at the end of April 2013, with a \$2 billion Libyan cash deposit in late March inflating

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the latter figure. Meanwhile, according to the Financial Times, Egypt's public sector salary bill has risen by 80 percent since the uprising to \$25 billion annually; 400,000 government jobs have been added, and an additional 400,000 will be made permanent by the end of June.

This combination of shrinking reserves and growing expenditures is threatening the government's ability to import wheat and fuel, which it sells at subsidized rates. Fuel and fertilizer shortages have also impacted domestic wheat production, which is unlikely to reach Cairo's goal of 9.5 million tons — a benchmark intended to reduce Egypt's dependence on foreign imports. The fuel shortages have also catalyzed regular electricity outages (including multiple times in one day at Cairo International Airport), and rural areas are reporting water outages. These problems are expected to worsen as Egyptians turn on their air conditioners during the summer; the situation will become especially uncomfortable once Ramadan begins in early July, when approximately 90 percent of the population will be observing the month-long fast during daylight hours.

Historically, wheat shortages and subsidy cuts have sparked mass protests in Egypt, such as the 1977 "Bread Riots" and the demonstrations that accompanied the 2008 global food crisis. Indeed, fuel shortages have already given rise to sporadic protests nationwide since March. Although these demonstrations have been relatively small thus far, summertime power outages that make it too uncomfortable to be indoors could force more people into the streets.

Since November 2012 — when President Muhammad Morsi asserted virtually unchecked executive authority and rushed an Islamist-dominated constitutional process to ratification — Egypt's non-Islamist opposition has protested the Muslim Brotherhood-led government's autocratic behavior and increasingly questioned its legitimacy. For many activists, the Brotherhood's use of violence against non-Islamist protesters on December 5 represented the point of no return; the group's subsequent assaults on media freedom (e.g., prosecuting journalists who criticize Morsi) have led some to call for the military to return to power.

The latest iteration of this movement is the "Tamarod" (rebellion) petition campaign, which opposition activists launched on May 1. The campaign seeks to "withdraw confidence" in Morsi and rally public support for early presidential elections by focusing on specific grievances, including the persistent lack of security, ongoing poverty, and Morsi's supposed "subservience to the Americans." While the petition will likely fall short of the 15 million signatures its supporters

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hope to collect by June 30 — the one-year anniversary of Morsi's inauguration — the fact that it has already collected 2 million indicates widespread frustration, and June 30 may emerge as a major protest date.

The Brotherhood's response to these political challenges has only exacerbated the situation and seemingly strengthened the opposition's resolve. Rather than engaging its opponents, the government is repressing them. Ahmed Maher, founder of the "April 6" opposition movement, was recently arrested after returning from a trip to the United States, charged with inciting protests outside the interior minister's house. The prosecutor-general is also investigating two prominent television hosts — Amr Adib and former parliamentarian Mohamed Sherdy — for supporting the Tamarod campaign.

Unfortunately, Egypt's political polarization will likely persist well beyond the summer. The opposition will probably continue to be excluded from the political process. The next parliamentary elections, which have not yet been scheduled, are unlikely to occur before September, leaving street protests as the only viable avenue for opposition dissent. Moreover, when elections finally do occur, the Brotherhood will likely win again: even if the main opposition bloc (the National Salvation Front) abandons its current boycott commitment, as many analysts expect, its late entry will complicate efforts to compete with the Brotherhood's nationwide network, which has been in campaign mode since the beginning of the year.

In the interim, the Brotherhood appears unlikely to abandon exclusivist rule. Morsi's latest round of cabinet appointments further expanded the number of Brotherhood-affiliated ministers without adding any from non-Islamist parties, and he has rebuffed opposition demands to remove the interior and information ministers. Moreover, the officials who will lead the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a \$4.8 billion loan are all Muslim Brothers.

This polarization will significantly inhibit Egypt's economic recovery for the foreseeable future. Morsi's apparent focus on consolidating the Brotherhood's power is contrary to the IMF's insistence on more inclusive governance, which the agency views as necessary for ensuring broad political support for any loan. In addition, persistent political tension and civil strife will deter foreign investment and keep tourists away, leaving Egypt reliant on petrodollar infusions (e.g., from Qatar and Libya) that are unlikely to continue flowing indefinitely. The cash crunch will also complicate government efforts to restore security, further compounding

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lawlessness and economic woes.

Meanwhile, the military does not appear willing or able to steer the country in a more positive direction. Although the armed forces are generally considered Egypt's strongest institution, the generals have repeatedly signaled their lack of interest in returning to power. They recognize that they performed poorly when they ran the country prior to Morsi's election, and they seem to know they are no more likely to succeed in governing than the Brotherhood given the extent of Egypt's challenges. In addition, the military's undemocratic nature makes it incapable of engendering the kind of broad consensus needed for reform.

Egypt's worsening economic and political frustrations, coupled with the state's declining ability to maintain order, make upheaval a strong possibility this summer and beyond. Washington should therefore focus on two goals.

First, it should continue encouraging Egypt's political actors to dial down the tension. This means telling the opposition not to give up on politics, since participation in the current system provides a more likely path to power sharing than calling for a "rebellion" against Morsi, which would only exacerbate the country's instability and further damage the economy. As for the Muslim Brotherhood, Washington should tell Cairo that the painful choices required by necessary economic reform (e.g., tax increases and subsidy cuts) make including the opposition and forging political consensus vital. U.S. officials should also point out that Egypt cannot rely on petrodollar infusions to sustain its shrinking cash reserves indefinitely, and that failure to institute vital reforms will ultimately lead its benefactors to view it as a bad investment.

Second, Washington should prepare for the likelihood that the Brotherhood and opposition will reject this advice, and plan for potential instability. In particular, the administration should focus on the three strategic interests that could be jeopardized:

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- 1. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, which may come under pressure if turmoil leads to greater violence from Sinai or more hostile populist politics from Cairo**
- 2. The security of the Suez Canal, which recent civil unrest has already put at risk**
- 3. Counterterrorism cooperation, given the recent emergence of Salafist jihadists in Egypt**

Since the Egyptian military is primarily responsible for each of these items, the Obama administration should work with the generals to ensure that contingency plans are in place if the country's summer of discontent boils over.

Eric Trager is the Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute.

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MOHAMED MORSI'S BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY

Editorial

[Washington Post](#), May 13, 2013

Ahmed Maher, one of the leaders of Egypt's 2011 revolution, supported Islamist

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Mohamed Morsi in last year's presidential election because he believed Mr. Morsi's victory over a military-backed candidate would be more likely to consolidate democracy in their country. But during a visit to Washington last week, Mr. Maher told us that Mr. Morsi had betrayed him and his April 6 Youth Movement. "They lied, they broke promises, they killed members of April 6," Mr. Maher said. Mr. Morsi's government, he said, increasingly resembled that of former strongman Hosni Mubarak: "They only seek power."

Mr. Maher's strong charges soon were substantiated by another transgression: Upon returning to Cairo from the United States on Friday, he was arrested at the airport. The 32-year-old, who founded the April 6 movement in 2008 to organize protests against the Mubarak regime, was charged with inciting a protest in March against Mr. Morsi's interior minister. His transfer to a high-security prison quickly provoked a backlash both in Cairo and in Washington, and on Saturday authorities backed down. Mr. Maher was released, his case was transferred to a lower court and Mr. Morsi's office and political party repudiated the airport arrest.

That retreat still left Mr. Maher facing charges, according to the state news agency, of "resisting the authorities, insulting the police, gathering and obstructing traffic" — counts frequently used by the former dictatorship against public demonstrations. It offered new cause for concern about a government that repeatedly has proclaimed its commitment to both democracy and compromise with its opponents even as it prosecutes critics and prepares repressive new laws.

Mr. Maher's youth movement has resisted the polarization that has overtaken Egyptian politics in the past year. Though its leaders are secular liberal democrats with left-leaning views, they supported Mr. Morsi after obtaining direct assurances from him that he would seek consensus on the terms of a new constitution. The president broke that commitment in November, when he granted himself absolute power in order to force through a constitution favoured by the Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, a state prosecutor Mr. Morsi appointed in what opponents contend was another illegal manoeuvre has been bringing charges against critics, including journalists and organizers of demonstrations. A

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legislative body dominated by the ruling party has given preliminary approval to a law that would eviscerate Egypt's civil society, shutting down almost all government-watchdog and human rights groups.

Mr. Morsi's spokesmen have asserted that he does not favour the political prosecutions and that the government is preparing a new version of the civil society law. But the president has not removed the prosecutor he appointed nor met other reasonable opposition demands, such as the correction of a gerrymander of electoral districts legislated by his party.

Mr. Maher opposes counterproductive strategies embraced by other opposition leaders, including a boycott of future elections or support for a military coup. But he warns that the United States is repeating past mistakes in Egypt by appearing to tolerate Mr. Morsi's consolidation of power. "If you want to support democracy, say we are here in Egypt to support democracy, not whoever is in office," Mr. Maher says. That's advice the Obama administration should heed.

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On Topic

[Egypt's Supreme Court Rules Against Shura Council](#): *Zenobia Azeem, Al-Monitor, June 3, 2013*—In a surprising decision, Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) ruled on June 2 that the Shura Council, currently the country's only functioning legislative body, and the Constituent Assembly, which drafted the December 2012 Constitution, are unconstitutional.

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[Monthly Infiltration from Sinai Drops from 2,000 to 2: Prime Minister's Office, June 2, 2013](#)—Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday, "The fence that we built in the south is achieving the result for which it was erected.

[Ethiopian Dam Project Raises Fears of Water Deficit in Egypt: Ahmad Mustafa, Al-Monitor, May 30, 2013](#)—Ethiopia's decision to begin diverting the course of the Blue Nile (the largest of the Nile river's branches), as a prelude to the construction of the Renaissance Dam, put Egyptian diplomacy in a difficult position and stirred fears over Cairo's declining share in the Nile waters, but the Egyptian presidency managed to tame these fears.

[Jihad on Egypt's Christian Children: Raymond Ibrahim, Gatestone Institute, June 3, 2013](#)—Attacks on Christian children in Egypt are on the rise. Earlier this week, a six-year-old Coptic Christian boy, Cyril Yusuf Sa'ad, was abducted and held for ransom. After his family paid the ransom, the Muslim kidnapper, Ahmed Abdel Moneim Abdel-Salam, killed the child and threw his body in the sewer of his house

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