

## Crisis in Egypt

Committee on Foreign Relations  
US Senate  
July 25, 2013

Testimony by

**Michele Dunne**  
Vice President  
Director, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East  
Atlantic Council

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, members of the Committee, thank you for the honor of testifying before this committee about the crisis in Egypt. As we analyze the political turmoil in Egypt and try to sort out US policy options, I would like to raise four points for your consideration:

**First**, the July 3 removal of Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi by military coup following enormous demonstrations should not be understood primarily as a triumph of secularism over Islamism. Along with secularists and Islamists, there is a third major player in Egyptian politics: the state itself, which was left largely intact after the removal of former President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. In the period after Mubarak's ouster, the military (the most powerful player within the state) worked with the Islamists and against the secular opposition. Now the military, as well as other state institutions that were on the defense after the 2011 revolution, have allied with the secular parties against the Brotherhood. So what has happened is in part a reassertion of the Mubarak era state, a sort of counterrevolution.

In addition, it is important to recognize that the current state-secularist alliance is anti-Brotherhood but not necessarily anti-Islamist. The Salafi Nour Party supported the removal of Morsi and has already exerted its influence by vetoing cabinet choices and getting its preferred wording on the status of Islamic sharia into the temporary constitution.

**Second**, the United States should reserve judgment for now as to whether the removal of Morsi will put Egypt back on a path toward democracy or not. It is too soon to tell and the signs are contradictory. On the positive side of the ledger, the military is not exerting control directly but

rather has put civilians out front, including a president from the judiciary and a cabinet including respected technocrats and well known secular political figures. The cabinet is particularly well placed to address the economy, which is in dire straits. And the new transition roadmap puts the rewriting of the constitution before the holding of new parliamentary and presidential elections. This corrects a major flaw of the first transition in which constitution-writing followed elections, allowing the winners to dominate the process and exclude the losers.

On the negative side of the ledger, the way in which the democratic process was cast aside on July 3 is troubling. Morsi was a failure as a president, who behaved as though winning 52 percent of the vote gave him a mandate to rule as a pharaoh. The broad public opposition to his leadership was real, seen in the millions who signed a petition for early elections and poured into the streets on June 30. But it would have been much more powerful and salutary for Egypt's young democracy if Morsi had been defeated in an early election or referendum; instead, his removal from office by the military shortly after protests began sets a dangerous precedent. Instead of learning the lesson that ineffective and undemocratic governance brings a comeuppance at the ballot box, the Brotherhood and others Islamists have learned that playing the democratic game by the rules does not pay off.

In addition, the new transition is in danger of repeating the most important mistake of the earlier post-Mubarak stage, which was a failure to build a broad consensus because critical players were excluded from important decisions. Before the July 3 removal of Morsi it was the secular liberals and leftists who were excluded; now it is the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt is moving into a period in which one of the most deeply-rooted movements in the country's political life might be excluded, perhaps severely repressed or at a minimum strongly disadvantaged, just as the secularists were until recently.

While Egyptian officials are speaking the language of inclusion and reconciliation, their actions toward the Muslim Brotherhood are saying the opposite. In addition to Mohammed Morsi, an undisclosed number—perhaps two dozen—of senior leaders of the Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice Party are detained incommunicado without charge, with new rumors surfacing daily about serious crimes with which they might be charged, including treason. They have been banned from travel and their assets seized. The Brotherhood-dominated upper house of parliament has been dissolved, and the new transition government is busy expunging Brotherhood appointees from bodies such as the Supreme Press Council and National Council for Human Rights. And there is talk of outlawing the Brotherhood itself, which only recently gained license as a non-governmental organization.

**Third**, despite the military's argument that it spared the country a civil war, Egypt might well be headed into greater instability. The new transition might once again produce a constitution and elected bodies that a significant part of the population considers illegitimate, leading to repeated political breakdowns, resets, and military intervention in politics—a cycle of instability. Already there has been a troubling spike in violence, with more than 160 killed and 1400 injured in demonstrations, daily clashes between pro and anti-Morsi groups throughout the country, and hundreds arrested. Jihadi attacks against military and police officers in the

Sinai have increased sharply, with more than 20 officers killed in the past two weeks. With Islamists rethinking the value of peaceful political participation, Egypt could easily see a return to the type of insurgency and domestic terrorism it experienced in the 1990s, when jihadis targeted government officials, Christians, and tourists. Under those circumstances, it will not be possible to attract tourists and investment back to Egypt in the numbers needed to revitalize the economy.

**Fourth**, in light of these many dangers, the United States should proceed with caution and be guided by basic principles. Egypt can only be a reliable security partner for the United States and peace partner for Israel if it is reasonably stable, and it will only become stable once it develops a governing system that answers strong popular demands for responsiveness, accountability, fairness, and respect for citizens' rights.

There will be signs in the coming weeks showing in which direction Egypt is moving after this cataclysmic change. Will Morsi and other Brotherhood leaders be released and encouraged to participate in peaceful politics, or will they be imprisoned on trumped-up charges? Will there be freedom for the media, including those affiliated with the Brotherhood? Will the process to amend the constitution be broadly inclusive, or will it be rushed, non-transparent, and designed to meet the demands of a chosen few, such as the military and the Salafis? Will Egyptian and foreign non-governmental organizations be given freedom to operate and serve as watchdogs of the transition, and will the recent convictions of 43 NGO workers (including 16 Americans) be reversed?

The United States should take this time to pause, suspend military deliveries and assistance in accordance with our law, and review policy towards and assistance to Egypt, including special privileges such as cash flow financing for Foreign Military Financing. The US administration should carry out its own internal review as well as a broad dialogue with Egyptians inside and outside the government, with the stated intention of resuming assistance as soon as the country is clearly back on a democratic path. Military and economic assistance should not be kept on autopilot as they were during the Mubarak years, but updated in order to support a stable, prosperous, democratic Egypt that plays a vital and responsible role in the Middle East region.

The United States is understandably wary of damaging its longstanding relationship with the Egyptian government and military, but it should also avoid pursuing a policy that appears cynical and unprincipled. Hewing too closely to the party currently in power, treating opposition groups and civil society as irrelevant, and ignoring democratic principles have earned the United States sharp criticism from all sides in Egypt. But we should not make the mistake of concluding that the United States no longer has any influence there; the fact that Egyptians still pay such close attention to what our officials and diplomats do and say suggests quite the opposite.