

Viewpoints
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Back to the Drawing Boards

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The Obama administration has sometimes been tactically adroit in dealing with Egypt since the fall of Mubarak in February 2011; at other times it has been caught flat-footed. But the nature of political changes afoot in Egypt today now demands more than adjustment, but instead a fundamental rethinking of a relationship that has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East since the Nixon administration.

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In the summer of 2013, as in January and February 2011, the United States came to terms with the limits of its own influence in Egypt—for a moment. But while the U.S.-Egyptian official relationship seemed at first to weather the storm of the 2011 uprising, in 2013, the underlying problems could no longer be disguised. The Obama administration has at times been an adept tactician and at other times a bit clumsy. But the underlying strategic relationship with Egypt was left unexamined—it was not reevaluated, revised, repudiated, or restored. With Egypt in political tumult and the United States regarded warily at best by all Egyptian political forces, the choice of what to do may not be avoided for much longer.

Since the Nixon administration, a close relationship in diplomacy and security affairs between the executive branches of the two countries has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East. But when Hosni Mubarak began to totter, frantic efforts by the Obama administration to secure U.S. interests while remaining “on the right side of history” led to calibrations, the subtlety of which was lost outside of the Beltway and of little interest to Egyptians. The result may have been healthy for both countries. Mubarak fell, and the military took control, haplessly leading a process of political transition that left the United States reacting rather than driving events.

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, the United States managed quite skillfully to salvage its policy. The Obama administration kept its priorities steady, at most with slight differences from those of its predecessors—in the first rank, maintenance of Israeli-Egyptian peace, close security relations, and coordination in regional crises such as the Gaza fighting of November 2012; in the second rank, movement toward democracy, human rights, and economic reform. By maintaining a close relationship with Egypt’s rulers (first the military high command, then President Mohamed Morsi’s team), the United States breathed continued (though hardly renewed) life into the partnership.

But there were problems. On the Egyptian side, suspicions of U.S. intentions, always fairly high, continued to climb as the United States was seen as complicit, first in military misdeeds and then in those of the Muslim Brotherhood. The United States also had to swallow some actions it found deeply disturbing—the closure of U.S.-backed NGOs and the trial of NGO workers that began in 2011, and an attack on the U.S. Embassy in 2012—as well as a steadily growing drumbeat of criticism from a wide variety of Egyptian political actors. Some of those criticisms were based on powerful critiques of U.S. policy (that it valued security issues at the expense of all else), but others were based on imaginary U.S. efforts to divide the country or impose Brotherhood rule.

Throughout this tumultuous period, the basic approach of the Obama administration to secure U.S. policy was not that different from its predecessors: figure out who is in charge and establish a close working relationship with regular communication with that source of authority. The United States could nudge that authority in liberal and democratic directions—but generally in private and gently, not in a way that would undermine the essential partnership. At times the United States could (still fairly privately) be a bit more forceful. With the military, the United States pressed against using force against protesters and in favor of

honoring the presidential election results. With Morsi, the United States urged a more conciliatory approach toward the opposition, even seeking to broker a deal and going so far as to beseech those close to the Egyptian president to coax the stubborn figure into reaching an understanding with the mounting opposition.

But that approach came to a crashing end with the overthrow of Morsi on July 3. The United States did have close institutional ties with the Egyptian military, to be sure, so in that sense the partnership continued. But the last-minute U.S. maneuvering to stave off a coup served primarily to persuade each Egyptian political actor that the United States was aligned with its adversaries. The ban on assistance after a military coup brought the Obama administration face-to-face with U.S. law before it decided simply to look the other way.

But the real problems for the Obama administration in Egypt after Morsi's overthrow were deeper than any tactical missteps; they were even deeper than the administration's position that it could ignore U.S. law. Instead, three long-term processes were at work that undercut the U.S. approach that had been followed in Egypt for decades.

First, the political atmosphere in Egypt has simply become poisonous for the United States. Political figures and pundits seem to seek to top each other not only in their denunciations of U.S. policy but also in their attribution of deeply hostile intentions to the United States. While U.S. officials prided themselves on their ability to accept and work with the Muslim Brotherhood, they are routinely viewed in Egypt as having imposed Brotherhood rule on the country – and often charged with plotting to return it. The extreme tone of Egyptian political discourse about the United States should serve at least one salutary purpose: it should dissuade Washington from thinking that the problem is simply one of messaging or minor tactical missteps. Something far more profound is at work. And it will be difficult to rebuild any kind of bilateral relationship with any public face in such an atmosphere.

Second, and more profoundly worrying over the long term, is a conviction in U.S. policy circles that what appeared to be a political transition – jerry-rigged, haphazard, and mismanaged as it was – over the past two years is now no longer identifiable as such. In 2011 and 2012, Egypt's daily lurches might cause anxiety, but there was still an identifiable trajectory by which the Egyptian political system was being rebuilt in a more participatory fashion. That is no longer clear today. There is, to be sure, a "road map" that the military initially decreed and that Interim President Adly Mansour has sketched out. But those most familiar with Egyptian politics regard that road map as unlikely to produce a stable political system capable of restoring legitimate leadership and sound decision-making any time soon. Egypt's presidents prior to 2011 may have been autocrats, but they were reliable autocrats. It is not clear that Egypt's post-2013 autocrats will be nearly as reliable.

Third, to the extent that it is emerging, the new political system seems to be based on renewed (if sometimes badly camouflaged) authoritarianism. The bloody suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, the restrictions on media, the return of an abusive security apparatus, and the insistence on various parts of the state apparatus (most notably the military and the security forces) that they are above politics and outside the reach of the constitution make it difficult to see how the old tactic of privately nudging reform can be convincingly played by anyone.

There are, to be sure, few signs that those emerging as dominant in Egypt wish to pursue any radical reorientation in Egypt's diplomatic or regional security posture. There may be friction with the United States on such issues, but dramatic crisis is far less likely. Instead of a full rupture, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship is likely to see mistrust, suspicion, and wariness – and it is likely to be brought under pressure by domestic politics on both sides.

When the U.S. ambassador who shepherded U.S. policy through the post-revolutionary period, Anne Patterson, left the country recently, no U.S. diplomat was sent to replace her. The position of U.S. ambassador to Egypt is strangely vacant, and the last name floated for the job, Robert Ford, was subject to a bizarre campaign of vilification in the Egyptian press. So the United States has instead taken advantage of the nearby presence of a senior and accomplished diplomat, David Satterfield, who had recently retired from the U.S. Foreign Service to head the multinational peacekeeping force in Sinai. By bringing him in as charge d'affaires starting August 30, Washington has a seasoned diplomat minding the store – for now. There can be no better symbolic statement of the Obama administration's current predicament – it can call on able people and great expertise, but it does not seem to know what to do.



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