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Egypt: An Era of Uncertainty

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The recent events in Egypt signal the start of a period of instability and uncertainty for the country that will pose serious security and political dilemmas for Israel. Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate who was elected Egypt's fifth president, will launch his term in office with some serious questions hanging over his victory. The low voter turnout – a little over half of those eligible to cast a ballot – and the tiny margin over his opponent will allow the Egyptian opposition to claim that the new president earned only one-fourth of voter support. Although a legitimate political victory, for a nation where until 18 months ago the president regularly won 99 percent of the votes, the slim margin is liable to come back to haunt him.

No less problematic is the limit on presidential powers decreed by the Supreme Military Council on June 17, 2012, minutes after the ballots closed. The announcement stated that the Council would appoint the military commander in chief; the president would be unable to declare war without the Council's backing; should internal struggles develop, the president would be allowed to call on the army to restore order only with the Council's approval; and finally, the Council would retain authority regarding formulation of Egypt's new constitution. Given the fact that the Council is the key political power to determine the members of the group writing the new constitution, the announcement ensures that at least for now, the Council has control of the main issues of the new constitution.

Similarly, the dissolution of the recently elected parliament, with its overwhelming Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist majority, on the pretext that the election process was legally flawed, is indicative of the Council's determination to retain its influential position in any new political arrangement in Egypt. In order to minimize the harsh criticism following the announcement, the Supreme Military Council charged two of its senior members, Generals Assar and Shaheen, with the task of explaining that the steps are temporary and a result of the fact that there is no parliament, and that full power would be given to the elected president by the end of June 2012. The two heaped much praise on Egypt's democracy and the will of the Egyptian people, but it is doubtful that they

managed to assuage the concerns of those who are eager to see the army end its political involvement.

Since the end of the second round of presidential elections over one week ago, one of the most intriguing questions is: did the Supreme Military Council and Morsi use this time to try to arrive at understandings on these issues? Furthermore, did they discuss other key questions with implications for Egypt's conduct on the regional arena, especially the Israeli-Palestinian issue? No less interesting is the question of whether the American administration continued its efforts to reach understandings with the Muslim Brotherhood and the new president. A direct dialogue with the United States would be of great importance in the immediate future, while relations between the army and the new civilian regime are forged and while Egypt assumes its stance on regional issues. Indeed, Morsi himself, in a column written for *The Guardian* (June 15, 2012), roundly criticized Egypt's disappearance from the world stage, claiming this created a dangerous vacuum that threatened regional stability: "Egypt's destiny is to lead. If I am elected on Sunday, I will make sure that Egypt fulfils its destiny."

The Grad rockets fired recently deep into Israel and the murder of an Israeli construction worker on the border fence are signs of the decline in security along Israel's Egyptian border, and more importantly, of a possible course of action by Palestinian terrorist organizations that may gain support – if only passive – from the Egyptian regime that is controlled – even if not entirely – by the Muslim Brotherhood. An escalation of terrorist activity from the Sinai Peninsula highlights the dilemma of Israel's response. A military reaction seen as containing a line-crossing element, even if localized, will strengthen the demand made by most of the Egyptian presidential candidates to renegotiate the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, in particular the military appendix limiting Egypt's military presence in Sinai (and that of Israel within its territory along the border). The current lack of clarity about the source of authority in Egypt, especially on security issues, is liable to last for quite some time, leaving Israel in a dialogue with the Egyptian military alone and zero access to the senior civilian echelon. Israel could find itself having to choose among courses of action, all of which are liable to lead to negative political consequences with widespread ramifications beyond the bilateral Israeli-Egyptian domain. On the one hand, Israel's complaints might remain unanswered in the no-man's-land between the Egyptian army and the civilian authority; on the other hand, military action might negatively affect Israel's delicate, still ongoing, dialogue with the Egyptian security establishment, and this might be used by the civilian regime to prove the need for abolishing the limits placed on Egypt's military presence in Sinai.

The United States has a formal position in the context of Israeli-Egyptian relations, as it is a third-party signatory to the 1979 peace treaty, but its ability to assist would be limited mainly because of its desire not to rattle America's relations with the new Egyptian

civilian government. It is also unclear how effective an American threat to cut military aid to Egypt would be. The Muslim Brotherhood president and new government are not likely to mourn the weakening of Egypt's military. One may assume that this issue too was discussed in the effort by the president-elect and Egyptian army leaders to reach preliminary understandings.

At this point, the Israeli government would be wise not to allow itself to react to provocations intended to draw the IDF into a confrontation in the Sinai, especially by Gaza Strip Palestinian organizations. The Israeli government should maintain the line still open with the Egyptian military establishment and use the channel of communications afforded by the American administration and Congress. At this stage of internal political change in Egypt, a restrained Israeli response leaves some hope for dialogue with the new civilian establishment there, although initial signs are not encouraging.

References to Israel by key Muslim Brotherhood spokesmen in recent months have been stereotypical and negative. One may hope that the new leadership's attempt to confront Egypt's major challenges will lead to a more sober and realistic approach regarding Israeli-Egyptian relations. As against Israel's need to clarify to Egypt that Israel cannot accept anarchy and a loss of Egyptian control over Sinai, Israel must weigh its steps in light of developments in the region at large. An Israeli military response in the Sinai would have implications far beyond the peninsula, and the Muslim Brotherhood might find it advantageous to expand that response, making sure it came from elements associated with the movement in the Palestinian territories and Jordan. It may be that other attacks attempted from the Sinai, with no Egyptian response or activity to prevent them, will necessitate Israeli military involvement, but the time for such action has not yet come.

