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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Egypt Sets out on a Dangerous Path: Treating Political and Diplomatic Problems as Security Threats

by *Nathan J. Brown*

In what is sometimes called the world's first piece of recorded history, the Narmer Palette — standing today in the Egyptian Museum — illustrates how two Egypts became one, when Narmer, a king from Upper Egypt, conquered the Delta. Five thousand years later, Egypt's rulers face a similar task of unification. In some ways, the effort required will be greater than that of their ancestors. They must not only overcome a deep division within Egyptian society but also an equally challenging divide between the perception of Egypt inside and outside of the country — and the military tools that the Narmer Palette boasts of are today likely to make these divisions worse.

Turning a Divide into a Chasm

On July 3, 2013, after a massive demonstration demanding new presidential elections, the Egyptian military high command, backed by other leading state institutions and most Egyptian political actors, deposed Egypt's first freely elected president, Muhammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. While the coup was widely supported by the public, the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympa-

thizers obviously objected to the move, and they did so loudly and publicly.

As time has passed, the developments have only deepened the division in Egyptian society. In recent visits to the country, I have been struck in discussions with those of a more religious inclination by how deeply they feel alienated from the new political order and from society. They fear arrest or losing their jobs, to be sure. But they also feel socially excluded and muzzled in public discussions.

In the current atmosphere in Egypt — in which religious broadcasters are silenced, preachers are enjoined from expressing opposition sentiments, protests are banned, and elections falling short of international standards for impartial administration — it is impossible to tell with any certainty how many people are content with the emerging political order. But the opposition camp is likely a minority — perhaps at most one-quarter of the society. Nevertheless, the task of national reconciliation is urgent.

At present, all the ingredients exist for the emergence of a deep and abiding schism, one that is not merely dysfunctional but also the perfect environment

Op-Med

for incubating political violence. The current moment is leaving a deep imprint on the Islamist side of the social and political spectrum. In the month after Morsi's overthrow, his supporters held standing rallies in many locations, most notably Cairo's Rabi`a al-`Adawiyya Square. On August 14, 2013, military-backed security forces suppressed the demonstrations. At Rabi`a and in other violent clashes, deaths ran into four digits — a very high figure for a country that had not known such political violence in the past.

In several conversations, I have been told harrowing stories from those present in anti-regime demonstrations, who carried bodies, watched friends being shot, and witnessed wonton bloodshed. The widespread opposition use of the four-fingered signal (Rabi`a means "four") suggests that August 14 was a defining moment for the Islamist opposition, one that is now being deeply imprinted in their collective memory.

But in almost all non-Islamist public spheres, the events of Rabi`a fit into a very different story, one of the defeat of terrorism. The demonstrators were violent, armed, and disruptive, say the new regime's supporters, and speakers at demonstrations threatened further violence — a threat they claim has been implemented in a subsequent series of bombings in different locations in the country.

Those who have studied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would likely find such unshared sense of trauma familiar territory, but it is a new experience for the Brotherhood and a troubling one for Egyptian society. Even when Islamists were deemed a security threat in the past, the enmity seemed to come more from the regime than from the society. And in recent decades, Islamists had achieved significant gains in integrating themselves in public life. But today, the society is so deeply embittered that "reconciliation" has become a dirty word for many.

In such an environment, a harsh approach by the regime is likely to make the situation worse; indeed, it has probably led to the transformation of a localized tense situation in Sinai into a nationwide campaign of terrorism and has transformed the Muslim Brotherhood, for decades a largely peaceful movement, into one whose youth are coming to see Molotov cocktails as a legitimate political tool.

Avoiding a Way Out

In the month after the coup, the parties to the conflict within Egypt tolerated a variety of international (and some domestic) efforts to find some ground for compromise. European and U.S. mediators filed through Cairo and quiet closed-door shuttling missions were held among Egyptians. But in the time since the Rabi`a crackdown, international efforts have ground to a virtual halt and those participating in domestic efforts have themselves been subject to vilification or even criminal charges. For example, Emad Shahin, a professor at the American University in Cairo, took part in some mediation efforts and now finds himself charged with various forms of espionage and sedition.

In discussions inside and outside the country, I have been deeply struck how deep the gaps are in perceptions — to the extent that it seems as if there are two different Egypts in existence at the same time. Internally, a majority of Egyptians appear to believe in a "road map" toward a more democratic and stable future, only threatened by a few "terrorists" and critical foreign journalists and diplomats, according to the narrative of the regime. Outside the country — in discussions with diplomats, journalists, academics, and others — Egypt is being perceived as a growing problem, one with re-emergent authoritarianism, serious signs of instability, and an aimless political leadership focused only on tomorrow rather than on the daunting long-term challenges the country faces.

And as with the internal division between two Egypts, this one is resistant to a security-oriented solution. The impulse of Egypt's new leadership to repress opposition only worries foreign observers more.

Possible Paths Forward

As an American, I was struck a decade ago by a similar gap in perceptions. Internally, the United States perceived itself as a country standing for high principles and as being wounded precisely because of those principles. Internationally, it was seen as behaving erratically and irresponsibly.

I wish my fellow citizens had shown a bit more concern for the international views at that time. When a country as prosperous and powerful as the United States behaves without wisdom, the world suffers. The price of Egypt's leadership not listening to international concerns might be a bit different: when a country like Egypt behaves as if every

Op-Med

political and diplomatic problem has a security solution, the main victims, by contrast, are tens of millions of Egyptians.

But perhaps this gap offers Egypt some hope. For all their angry complaints about friends who are held to behave like enemies and journalists who are held to refuse to tell the truth, Egypt's leaders are deeply sensitive to their international image. A poor country can probably afford no other attitude. And that may be Egypt's salvation.

To be sure, even if reconciliation turns from being a dirty word to a positive slogan, it will be hard to implement. The seeds of mistrust among Egyptians have sprouted deep roots; the authoritarian practices that had come under attack in 2011 are now back in full force. But there is a lingering sense of national unity, an engaged population, and a widely shared sense that the country's enormous social and economic problems will not be easily solved. If the new leadership turns from an insistence that they face a security threat to one of political integration, they will not receive a warm welcome from the Islamist opposition; the road back to national unity will require not simply new attitudes but deep concessions from both sides. An immediate release of political prisoners and a pledge to respect the Brotherhood's legality would be good first steps.

They would also be difficult ones for Egypt's leaders to take. This is where a consistent international message can help: Egypt's new regime is operating under an international cloud. The country's leadership cannot address its domestic problems as long as that cloud hangs over its head. It will make investors reluctant, human rights organizations critical, media vocal, and governments embarrassed. So far Egyptians have blamed the messenger. Steady delivery of the message may make that more difficult.

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