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Egyptian Crisis

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The flight BA2886 from London to Tunis on the 30th of January 2011¹ was not just another ordinary air cruise. Among the passengers, over 20 years the exiled Mohammed Ghanouchi, the leader of Nahda party was finally about to step on Tunisian soil, marking the end of Ben Ali's era. An era which is reshaping the politics of Middle East, known for its sclerotic and archaic regimes. While the triumph of the Arab Street toppling the 23 years Tunisian President surprised many, the world's attention turned over to the Egyptian protests for more than two weeks, demanding the end to Hosni Mubarak's presidency who is ruling the country since 23 Jul 1952 and by Emergency Law since 1981.

The Middle East is marginalized from the democratic epicenter and it is often debated whether this part of the world lacks the prerequisites for democratization. The United States has launched freedom military operations and huge aid packs for democratization through the National Endowment for Democracy investing on civil society and the political parties' engagement in politics. However, this generosity appears to be 'selective', as the only concrete element of opposition in the Arab state is the Islamists, which for Washington creates great uneasiness. President Hosni Mubarak has been for over three decades a close ally to Washington, and the world is watching the Egyptian outcry with great anxiety. Are these riots actually the revolution which will overthrow the 'eternal' President or just a reaction of neutered citizens? This article will provide an overview of the Egyptian unrest, it will introduce the Egyptian opposition and will discuss the significance of the Egyptian Armed Forces and their role to the crisis, the implications of these riots regionally but also internationally and lastly a prognosis of a post Mubarak political stage.

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The opposition

The paradox of the Egyptian riots is that even though the mobilized masses appear unified demanding the resignation of the Egyptian President, the opposition appears to be a not so homogenous and unified body. There is no accepted and general prestigious opposition leader and the Muslim Brotherhood appears skeptical and reserved. The riots consist of various small political parties, protest movements of the bourgeoisie, intellectuals, middle class poor and a solid political youth movement of Islamic character which has been mobilized through the social networks like Facebook and Twitter. In the post Mubarak era looming in the horizon it seems uncertain whether the Muslim Brotherhood will dominate the Egyptian political landscape. Founded by Hassan Banna in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood had the longest continuous existence of any contemporary Islamist group. Beginning in 1984, the Brotherhood started running candidates in elections for the boards of Egypt's professional syndicates and for seats in parliament. In the mid 1990s some reformist members from the Brotherhood sought to form a new Hizb al-Wasat (Center Party). The leaders of Wasat helped launch the cross-partisan Movement for Change, known by its slogan, Kefaya (Enough) between 2004 and 2005 with a strong and active presence even now. 'Abd al-Mun'em Abu Futuh, arguably the Brotherhood's most important reformist figure, has become an important model and source of inspiration for a new generation of Islamist democracy². In 2005 they managed to win 88 seats in the parliament and the current leader is Mohammad Badie since 2010. So far the Brotherhood has not been openly involved in the riots as they show to wait for the ripeness of moment. They are aware that the world is afraid of the rise of Islamists in Egypt, and they don't want to give the regime a pretext to clamp down on the protestors. An additional reason is that they are facing serious divides among the party and are delaying to coordinate a common position as Egypt has never had free and fair elections.

The Nobel Prize holder and former President of International Atomic Energy, Mohammad ElBaradei who returned to Egypt few months ago, represent a more secular democratic movement. So far, it is unknown how many supporters he has. Seculars in Egypt and especially US, Israel and UK would most probably support a pro western, secular ruling party, serving vital national interests. He represents the other 'way'; not the authoritarian sclerotic regime, nor the Islamist. In his words, 'Mubarak has convinced the United States and Europe that they only have a choice between two options - either they accept this authoritarian regime, or Egypt will fall into the hands of the likes of bin Laden's al-Qaida. Of course that is not exactly true. Mubarak uses the specter of Islamist terror to prevent a third way: the country's democratization. But Washington needs to know that the support of a repressive leadership only creates the appearance of stability. In truth, it promotes the radicalization of the people"³. Additionally, a new movement under the leadership of Secretary General of the Arab League, Amir Moussa is slowly winning ground but it is still quite embryonic and not solid on a political agenda.

The recently appointed Vice President Omar Suleiman is playing an extremely important role in the evolution of the events. Appointed to appease the masses and retain his own grip on the presidency. The long head of Intelligence and Air Force Chief enjoys great authority within the armed forces and the police. Worth mentioning is his excellent personalized relations with Washington and Israel along with the Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces Lt. Gen. Sami Enan who returned to Cairo Jan. 29 after a week of intense discussions with senior U.S. officials and Defense Minister, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi are likely managing the political process behind the scenes. Many ana-

lysts believe that these three key individuals will take over once Mubarak resigns, as the army is fundamental player in the political outcome. Obviously, the intelligence and military official will not illuminate the democratic path of Egypt. He has long been favored by the US government for his ardent anti-Islamism, his willingness to talk and act tough on Iran - and he has long been the CIA's main man in Cairo.

The role of Armed Forces

The Armed Forces in the Middle East are highly 'politicized' and historically the region is rich in coup d' etat. Since the Egyptian revolution of 1952, the military — most prominently the army — has played a key role in domestic political life. Every president since the revolution has been a military man, and military officials, active or retired, have occupied key positions in the government throughout the country's modern history. As the most respected institution in the country, the armed forces are the only power which could trigger a change on the Egyptian political stage. The Egyptian Armed Forces have kept a restrained position since the eruption of the riots, but everyone is aware that the armed forces are the key to the current crisis. The Army is willing for now to give Mubarak the time to arrange his political exit, but at the end they will either support the President and they will repress the riots or the force his resignation. The military has played two key roles, first guaranteeing the national security against external threats and second propping up whatever regime has been in power⁴. Three decades, the EAF has enjoyed an essentially symbiotic relationship with the Mubarak regime, based on mutual interest but it still uncertain if actually these 'interests' collide.

Regional Implications

Egypt is a pivotal country for the security architecture of the Middle East. Many policy-makers and analysts predict that if the Muslim Brotherhood eventually assumes control, that would mean that the Islamist could possibly end the 1978 peace treaty with Israel and an 'iranized' Egypt will slowly evolve. Moreover, Hamas would have an ally in Cairo which would make a connection with Shia Iran, as it is the first Sunni Islamist political movement to align with Tehran. For Israel a possible demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula will pose a serious threat to its southern front. As Wikileaks revealed the Arab leaders are much more concerned about the prospect of a nuclear Iran than working towards a solution of the Middle East Peace Process⁵. The secular groups in Egypt, but also Washington and Israel are working hard to prevent this scenario of an Islamist government. For Washington even though commanded the 'peaceful and orderly transition' of power to start 'now' it would be a serious loss in intelligence services, as Cairo's intelligence was a channel to the Arab world. Mubarak throughout his presidency transformed a giant security state, a mukhabarat state to ensure his political survival.

Post Mubarak Prognosis

As these lines are filling the paper, President Mubarak is announcing his resignation from the office of President of the Egyptian Republic and is handing over power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Probably the Egyptian President delayed his exit in order to

show that Washington was not pushing him out when he announced that he will remain until the next elections as his resignation would create a political chaos in the country. It is not clear who will lead Egypt after Mubarak's fall. Three possible scenarios appear regarding the outcome of the riots and Mubarak's fall. First, that the key political personalities of the vice President, the chief of Armed Forces and the Defense Minister will remain in power most probably backed by Washington as the best choice. Omar Suleiman is not the best option to help Egypt into a democratic transition as his hands are 'tainted'. Second, the demonstrators could force elections in which El Baradei or someone like him could be elected and Egypt might overthrow the statist model built by Nasser and proceed on the path of democracy. Egypt might well produce a moderate, democratic, pro-Western state that will then be more able to resist an Islamist challenge. This scenario is quite unlikely, as El Baradei hasn't showed yet how many supports he has or whether he could form a coalition government with the Brotherhood. Third, the demonstrators will force elections, which the Muslim Brotherhood could win and move forward with an Islamist-oriented agenda something, which would be very disturbing not only for Israel and Washington, but also for the neighboring states. Under this scenario, we could also predict a coalition government after a provisional government, where the Muslim Brothers would legally enter the political stage. The fourth possibility is that Egypt will sink into political chaos. The most likely path to this would be elections that result in political gridlock in which a viable candidate cannot be elected.

The Middle East is characterized by democratic sterility and the Arab regimes have proved their resilience as they have absorbed and survived the shock of the political transformations of 1989, the democratization of Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union⁶. By observing the states in that geographical area we find states which can be described as authoritarian, weak or failed. Also security dominated or mukhabarat states, privatized states in the hands of small ruling elites family states that carry a family's name, tribal states and various degrees of client and proxy states. And then we find the terror of socio economic marginalization, which is part of the democratic deficit of the Middle Eastern state. The Arab street is marginalized both in domestic and international context. Most Arabs feel strong and confident about their culture, religion and identity, but powerless as citizens of their state. The reason is that the feeling and right of citizenship is neutered. The concept of 'citizen' has been cauterized by the lack of free speech, corruption and huge economic inequalities. The Jasmine revolution managed to topple Ben Ali, the crisis in Egypt is continuing. The regional states take precautions. Two days after the Tunisian revolt, the Syrian government announced a social aid fund that would pay around \$300m to the country's low earners and unemployed⁷. Kuwaiti rulers offering free food, the Yemeni regime reducing prices by 10%, Jordan committing to maintenance of subsidies and raising wages⁸. Today's protests – both on the streets and in cyberspace – share a broad common theme: that people in this part of the world have been denied a democratic voice for too long.

NOTES

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