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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.

## The West and the Emerging “Gray Democracy” in Egypt

by Roberto Aliboni

During the past two years, the governments of Atlantic Alliance countries have supported the rise of the Muslim Brothers as a governmental force in Egypt and Tunisia. While anticipating deep cultural differences, they bet on the Brothers’ overall democratic orientation. The United States was the first to espouse that policy and to pursue it consistently and vigorously. The European governments, while more cautious in their statements, have followed suit. In the framework of a new partnership doctrine, the European Union (EU) has expressed more stringent and detailed expectations of North Africa’s democratization than North Atlantic governments. Still the EU, like its member governments, did not hesitate to bet on the Muslim Brothers and their apparent democratic bent. Since Egypt is a top transatlantic concern because of its crucial geopolitical role, Western support focuses on this country in particular.

So far, Egypt has received financial support from Saudi Arabia (\$2.7 billion), Qatar (\$5 billion), Turkey (\$1 billion), and Europe (a package of \$6.4 billion from the EU, its members states, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Recon-

struction and Development). In 2011, Egypt initiated negotiations for a key loan of \$4.8 billion with the IMF. Solidly supported by the United States and other Western countries, the negotiation succeeded, and on November 20, 2012 the preliminary accord with the IMF was signed. However, it failed to be finalized as anticipated on December 19 and was postponed to January 2013, as the developments that followed the Egyptian president’s November 22 decree on the constitutional referendum prompted a pause to reflect.

This pause might well go beyond January and bring about some significant corrections to the policy line pursued by Western countries so far. President Mohamed Morsi’s ultimatum for the Constitutional Commission to deliver the text of the constitution overnight with a view to submitting it to a referendum and approving it has precipitated a very serious political crisis.<sup>1</sup> Most of the opposition’s representatives in the Constitutional Commission refused to participate in

<sup>1</sup> Issandr El-Amrani, “Navigating Egypt’s Political Crisis,” *ECFR Commentary*, December 11, 2012, [http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary\\_navigating\\_egypts\\_political\\_crisis](http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_navigating_egypts_political_crisis).

the deliberations and did not vote. The opposition considers the new constitution a backward and fundamentally Islamist text, which does not provide sufficient guarantees for citizens and minorities. In short, the constitution as approved by the referendum puts a seal on the irreconcilable fracture between Islamists and non-Islamists that has been seen throughout the transition. Furthermore, participation in the referendum was very low: a turnout of 32 percent compared to 49 percent in the presidential election, the lowest among the various consultations held since Mubarak's fall.<sup>2</sup> The referendum clearly attests to a significant disaffection among voters, a disaffection that seems to involve the very constituency the Islamists were able to attract in previous electoral consultations.

There is a broad, ongoing debate on the crisis, with diverging evaluations between those who assume that President Morsi was forced to employ bad means to attain a fair end and those who believe that employing bad means has compromised the very end of the transition itself, that is, Egypt's democratic nature. On this point, discussions will continue for a long time and even the judgment that history will hand down some day will be difficult. Today, all one can see is that the democratic transition initiated in 2011 in North Africa is now in crisis. It must be added that the crisis could grow worse if the clash between Islamists and non-Islamists that is arising in Tunisia were to usher in another mutually exclusive confrontation, as is happening in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Thus, developments are posing a question to Western governments, beginning with the United States: in response to the 2011 uprisings in North Africa and then the Levant, they abandoned old allies and bet on the Muslim Brothers' suitability to build democratic, moderate, and inclusive regimes. Should the West keep on supporting them, and if so, how, and how much?

At first, the United States, European governments, and the EU responded differently to the emerging crisis. The U.S. administration kept silent and the officials consulted by the media tended to justify Morsi's behaviors saying that

the opposition was too demanding and intransigent.<sup>4</sup> A sharper response came from the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Lady Catherine Ashton reminded Egyptian authorities of what they had officially agreed upon with the EU, that is that "the overarching values of respect for social justice, socio-economic development, rule of law, human rights, and good governance must inspire our common actions in the future."<sup>5</sup> The European governments, for their part, were very cautious and, in substance, have stayed closer to Washington than Brussels.

The Western policy will certainly not change in the short term. Both the Americans and the Europeans will wait for the upcoming legislative elections, which will be held in April 2013 and will finalize the new Egyptian regime's political setting. In keeping with the referendum's modest outcome, the Islamists, especially the Muslim Brothers, will probably come out weakened. This will be a dangerous development because it will push the Muslim Brothers toward the Salafi area. However, it is hard to believe that they will actually lose the elections.

That said, a change in Western policy is unlikely even in the longer term. In fact, there is no alternative to the Brothers' centrism since the secular opposition, in particular the democratic/liberal opposition, is fragmented, disorganized, and does not have a majority in the country for the time being and arguably for a long time to come. The majority is bound to remain Islamist for some time (a circumstance that could be unfavorable to Egyptians wanting to evolve towards a real democracy).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, should the support from abroad to the Muslim Brothers-led government fail, the risk would be a more or less quick drift toward the Salafists in the country and the region. Finally, while the short experience with President Morsi's government looks disappointing from the political angle so far, it definitely looks more promising from the point of view of regional security. This has arguably been attested to by the

4 David D. Kirkpatrick, "Obama Walks a Fine Line With Egyptian President," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2012, p. A3, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/world/middleeast/obama-walks-a-fine-line-with-egyptian-president.html>.

5 European Union, *Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the referendum in Egypt*, Brussels 25 December 2012, A597/12, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134560.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134560.pdf).

6 Thomas Carothers and Nathan J. Brown, "The Real Danger for Egyptian Democracy," *Carnegie Article*, November 12, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/11/12/real-danger-for-egyptian-democracy/eg5z>.

2 Nervana Mahmoud, "Morsi's Pyrrhic Victory," *EgyptSource Blog*, December 23, 2012, <http://www.acus.org/egyptsource/morsis-pyrrhic-victory>.

3 Anne Wolf, "Divided and Looking Where to Stand," *Sada. Online Journal of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 20, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/20/divided-and-looking-where-to-stand/evhz>.

## Op-Med

August 2012 crisis in the Sinai and its aftermath in inter-Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian relations. This is a very relevant argument for Western governments, especially the United States, as instrumental as this Muslim Brother policy may be.

Thus, while the North Atlantic governments may partially suspend or withdraw some aid or make it conditional, it is very unlikely that they will stop their support for Egypt or fundamentally change their policy in the short or even the medium term. Nevertheless, in the context of the emerging “gray democracy” that recent developments in Egypt seem to anticipate, it will not be easy to calibrate a policy of unbroken Western support. The core Western choice has been to trust moderate Islamist forces as agents of democratic transformation. For such trust to last and for it to continue to provide a rationale for Western policy, the Western countries need to urgently develop policies to encourage the Muslim Brothers toward democracy and moderation and away from their present ambiguity.

They need to intensify diplomatic action and political dialogue with a view to convincing the Egyptian government to act more inclusively toward the opposition. Many problems in the Egyptian transition are due not only to Islamists but also to the opposition parties. However the crux of the matter is inclusiveness and dialogue given that, while a majority can attain its objectives and preferences through ordinary legislative activity, the constitution ought to protect all citizens evenly.

At the same time, Western governments need to recalibrate their foreign policies to bring them more in line with Egypt's and Islamists' aspirations and objectives, to make cooperation easier and more feasible, and to prevent conflict and polarization.

Western policies to support democracy need to become less intrusive, aid policies need to sideline conditionality, and civil society must be given more chances of increasing international communications and mobility, that is by keeping Western doors open as much as possible to women and men. As for foreign policy, Western governments need to revive actions to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as to help stop the strong current tendencies toward a region dominated by sectarian trends.

Although present challenges require responses in the short term, sending out strong signals may help to strengthen trust between Islamists and the West and stop adverse trends in their relations as well as in the region.

### About the Author

Roberto Aliboni is currently a scientific advisor at IAI, and formerly the IAI general director and vice-president. He taught international economics at the Universities of Naples and Perugia from 1972 to 1979. In 1994, he established the Mediterranean Study Commission (MeSCo), the network of Mediterranean Institutes dealing with international and security affairs, which became EuroMeSCo in 1996.

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### About IAI

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economics, and international security. A non-profit organization, the IAI aims to disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences, and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities, and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are European institutions and policies, Italian foreign policy, trends in the global economy and internationalization processes in Italy, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, defense economy and policy, and transatlantic relations. The IAI puts out an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffariInternazionali*), a series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI*) and an Italian foreign policy yearbook (*La Politica Estera dell'Italia*).