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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.

A Post-Revolutionary Egyptian Foreign Policy? ... Not Yet

by *Philippe Droz-Vincent*

The January 2011 uprising and the protracted transition that followed represent an essential milestone in Egypt's political development. At its inception, the Egyptian uprising was not related to foreign policy and is unlikely to have much bearing on relations abroad in the immediate future. But as the transition unfolds and whatever its end result, it will affect Egyptian foreign policy in the years to come. In such a volatile internal situation, where will change come from and what degree of change is foreseeable?

The domestic political landscape will be the most important determinant of the reorientation, if any, of Egyptian foreign policy. The crux of the Egyptian uprising was its societal awakening, directed against the Hosni Mubarak regime's failed domestic management. But Egyptians were also fed up with the regime's foreign policy. In a very nationalistic country, citizens deeply resented the fact that their country's subordination to the United States and Israel had led to the gradual erosion of Egypt's status and leadership in the Arab world. A key question today is how the societal awakening

will reflect onto the Egyptian political system, beyond the direct mobilization in Tahrir square, which will inevitably wane as people start yearning for a return to normalcy. The new balance of power within the Egyptian political system will emerge from the interplay between the military, the revolutionary forces, liberals, and the Muslim Brothers. This new balance of power will have a direct bearing on Egyptian foreign policy, unlike during the Mubarak years, when foreign policy was the exclusive domain of the executive and was closed to public scrutiny.

The Content

Egypt's foreign policy under Mubarak was based on a triangular relationship with the United States and Israel after the Camp David I agreement, winning Egypt a large amount of aid, both civilian (from US\$800 million annually in the 1980s to \$250 million in 2011) and military (a steady flow of \$1.3 billion annually). Egypt has been a critical partner in the peace process for the United States and Israel, an essential political force guaranteeing stability in the Middle

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East, and a critical U.S. ally, allowing the United States to fly over Egyptian territory to the Persian Gulf and transiting through the Suez Canal. In the 2000s, it was instrumental in closing the Gaza Strip and brokering many security agreements between Israel and the Palestinians.¹ These fundamentals will remain in place. Given its own interest in preserving the flow of military aid, also in view of its dwindling finances, the military will remain influential and will preserve the relationship with the United States and Israel. As a consequence, the Egyptian police will continue to secure the Egypt-Gaza border. The Muslim Brothers have taken a pragmatic approach and have gone on a charm offensive to alleviate fears in Washington, whose political elites remain bewildered by the pace of change in Egypt. Talks about revising the Camp David accords are popular in Egypt, but not much will come out, with the exception of some adjustments agreed with Israel to help the Egyptian army secure the Sinai, where the situation has been steadily deteriorating.

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Furthermore, as in other transitional cases, economic stabilization will be crucial. As such, key topics in Egyptian foreign policy will be relations with the Gulf as a way to balance (conditioned) loans from the International Monetary Fund. As Egypt struggles with its economic problems

and strives to balance its budget, its foreign policy will also focus on negotiations with the United States regarding debt swaps, the prospect of a free trade agreement, and U.S. help in furthering Egypt's cause with other international donors. Another priority for Egyptian foreign policy will be the Nile Basin states, which are increasingly challenging Egypt's annual share of the Nile waters.

Looking Ahead: Reorienting Egyptian Foreign Policy

Despite these unchanging fundamentals, the conduct of Egyptian foreign policy will evolve in the longer term. Mubarak's foreign policy was often conducted "below the radar" of public opinion, characterized by secret deals (with the essential role played by the head of the military secret services Omar Suleiman), warm relations beyond the official "cold peace" with Israel (the Israeli prime minister was a more frequent visitor to Egypt than any Arab official), and discreet mediation on the Israeli-Palestinian front so as to avoid popular protests in Egypt. Emblematic in this respect were the commercial gas deals reached in 2005 and 2009 brokered by cronies of Mubarak and his sons. These behind-the-scenes deals will no longer be possible, because the new Egyptian rulers will be part of a more accountable Egyptian government, be it as a result of societal mobilization or more democratic rules. Notable in this respect is the fact that a gas deal with Israel was terminated by the Egyptian government in April 2012 following public outrage, and the gas pipeline has been sabotaged 14 times since Mubarak's fall.

As a consequence, there will be some distancing between the United States and Egypt. Egypt's support of U.S. interests in the Middle East can no longer be taken for granted, and U.S. strategic interests will be affected by mounting tensions between three strategic allies: Egypt, Israel, and Turkey. In the medium term, the United States will need to build a different relationship with a different Egypt in order not to replicate a "Pakistan on the Nile" situation, that is, an ally that, while under the strong influence of the military, is politically untrustworthy because of a chaotic domestic situation.

More than a year after Mubarak's fall, Egypt remains in a very volatile transitional situation. Disorganization prevails with an accompanying weakening of Egypt's political system

¹ See P. Droz-Vincent, "The Sad State of Egypt's Regional and Foreign Policy," in *Transition to What? Egypt's uncertain Departure from neo-authoritarianism*, Mediterranean Paper, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2011.

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and its regional role. In the short term, with a pressing domestic agenda and political squabbles prone to populist slogans, we are likely to hear much talk about a reorientation of Egyptian foreign policy, but this is likely to be largely insignificant, unless, of course, there is a flare-up of violence in Lebanon or Gaza. In the medium to long-term, however, while the fundamentals of Egyptian foreign policy may remain unchanged, a foreign policy more responsive to the public may entail a degree of distancing from the United States and Israel.

About the Author

Philippe Droz-Vincent is assistant professor of political science in international relations and comparative politics. He is the author of *The Middle East: Authoritarian Regimes and Stalled Societies* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), *Dizziness of Power: The American Moment in the Middle East* (Editions La Découverte, 2007), and articles: “Authoritarianism, revolutions, armies and Arab regime transitions” (*The International Spectator*, vol. 46, no. 2) and “From Fighting Formal Wars to Maintaining Civil Peace?” (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3).

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