

Crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood: Shifting Alliances in the Middle East

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A military coup d'état recently took place in a country whose military is financed by the United States. Some dislike using the term "coup" in the Egyptian case, given the massive popular demonstrations calling for greater democracy and freedoms than were possible under the Muslim Brotherhood and its constitution. But alongside our solidarity with the Egyptians struggling toward democracy, we must call a coup a coup, and attempt a geopolitical analysis of what is happening.

It is significant that the tendency toward "coup-denial" extends to the White House. If Egypt's army truly bit the hand that fed it, the US government and media would be repeating the word "coup d'état" ad nauseam, would already have cut off funding and would be making noises about the responsibility to intervene to protect a democratically elected government. Rather, Obama has adopted a wait and see attitude, saying disingenuously that he is "deeply concerned," but avoiding negative terminology. Secretary of State John Kerry said ridiculously, "We've got to give [the military] the benefit of the doubt." Under US law, the US cannot give aid to countries where the military ousts a democratically elected government. But it has neither condemned the coup nor cut off the aid.

The reason is that the US and its allies were clearly behind this coup, like so many others. The overthrow of President Morsi does not itself represent the decline of US power in the region. This is a real decline, but not the main factor in this event. Rather it seems that the US (and Israel) decided that it was time for Morsi to go. In this case then, US-Israeli interests converged with the popular Egyptian interest expressed in the protests. Rather than losing control of the Egyptian army, the US lost control over Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in general.

The context for this is found in the evolution of the Syrian situation and of political Islam over the past two years. Two years ago, the US was working closely with Islamists of various stripes throughout the Arab world, in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt as well as with its allies in the Gulf. Ennahda in Tunisia and the Brotherhood in Egypt were the US choices for taking power after the revolutions. Ennahda was well-known at the US embassy in Tunis during the period just after the revolution, and the US support for the Brotherhood in Egypt was long-standing. These conservative religious parties were most well-organized, were open to economic liberalism, and shared a common enemy with the US: the secular Left working toward a sovereign development project.

The West worked together with Islamists to overthrow Gaddafi – one of the sole leaders in the region who did have a sovereign development project based in national and not foreign interests – and subsequently helped ship them over to Syria to attempt a rerun there.

Islamist fighters of various degrees of extremism poured in to Syria from across the globe, largely financed by US allies in the Gulf. However, the civil war dragged on, the Syrian army took the upper hand against a splintered opposition, and the US lost control of its Islamist allies - if it ever really controlled them. Although it is difficult to generalize in a situation where there are many hundreds of different armed opposition groups, there is now great tension between the weak, Western-oriented, secular-leaning forces that make up the Free Syrian Army, and parts of the much stronger and more numerous Islamist forces. Some of the Islamist forces see the FSA and the National Coalition as simply the pawns of the West, and see their own role as combatting both the local heretics (seculars or Shia) and the Western infidels attempting to impose a foreign domination.

The US's and Israel's plan A in Syria seems to have been to try to use defecting officers and Islamist fighters to help bring down Assad relatively quickly and then, if possible, install a pro-Western government that could be controlled, or if not, allow the country to degenerate into a managed sort of chaos like in Libya. Given that the Syrian army is stronger than expected and the opposition uncontrollable, their plan B seems to have been to allow the war to drag on so that the Syrian army and the Islamists would mutually self-destruct.

The Islamist forces, on the other hand, despite their heterogeneity, want genuinely to win in Syria and to establish an Islamist state, the exact nature of which they disagree upon. Some of them seem simply to be fighting infidels. But many are fighting to establish a state which would be ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a state, if it came into being, would likely be allied with the AKP in Turkey, Qatar, Sunni forces in Iraq and elsewhere, Ennahda in Tunisia, Hamas in Palestine, and the Muslim Brotherhood in various countries, including Egypt.

Here the divergences between Saudi Arabia, closely allied to the US, and Qatar are important. The Saudis, already rulers of the most important state in the Muslim world in their opinion, seem not to have a particular state-building ambition in their financing of rebels. They are viscerally against the Muslim Brotherhood, fearing an Arab Spring in their own country. Qatar, on the other hand, which has historically had ambiguous if not tense relations with Saudi Arabia, is the main source of funding for the Brotherhood and has been working to put a branch of the Brotherhood into power in Syria. The ambition seems to be a pan-Sunni alliance stretching from Turkey to Egypt, to some degree reuniting or at least defragmenting the Arab-Muslim world.

The success of the Brotherhood in coming to power in Egypt may have given the sense that this is a real possibility. But the reality of such a regional Sunni alliance, especially with an ambition toward regional power if not hegemony, is not what the US or Israel had in mind when fostering the jihad in Syria. Such a Sunni axis could be even more threatening to Israel and to the US project than the Shia crescent.

Political Islam has an ambiguous and changing relationship with the US and the West in general. While Islamic political parties have historically been allies with the West, their rise to political power after the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, their copious funding provided principally by Qatar, their considerable fighting force, their strong organizational and networking capacity, and the decline of US power in general, has made them graduate, so to speak, to a new state of autonomy from the West. It would be wrong to overgeneralize about this very heterogeneous movement, comprising moderates, extremists, and everything in between. But one may say that it generally intends to revalorize and defragment the Arab-Muslim region, and contains many elements with an anti-Western

attitude, which is not simply an expression of moral and religious values, but also reflects a political position which desires emancipation from Western domination.

The convergence of interests that led to the US-Islamist collaboration against secular nationalists like Gaddafi and Assad seems thus to be breaking down, a fact which has greatly aided Assad. As a senior Syrian official said, "The magic has turned on the magician." It seems that, typically, the US considered only its short-term interests as it unleashed the Islamists against Assad, not considering what might happen if they became something more than just the easily manipulable foot-soldiers of imperialism.

The divergence between the West and Qatar concerning the situation in Syria can be seen in the fact that the Kerry-Lavrov plan for a Geneva II conference to find a negotiated way out of the Syrian mire was coldly received by Qatar. [Researchers at the Doha Institute, a Qatari think tank, wrote on June 26](#)

"The Americans thought that the Geneva Conference would help contain the ramifications of the crisis, particularly with the growing regional interventions on the Syrian question. [...] Although the Obama administration has yet to reveal the precise nature of the weaponry it will provide to the Syrian opposition, it has become clear that this will be limited sufficiently to enable only a correction in the imbalance of forces between the regime and the opposition that arose after Qusair. [...] Accordingly, it seems clear that the Obama administration remains committed to a policy which does not permit one side to achieve a military victory over the other and is again exerting pressure to reach a political resolution. [...] In parallel, Washington intends to intensify pressure on the opposition by linking arms supplies to its agreement to a settlement. In the meantime, and while agreement is being reached, Syria will remain an arena for exhausting the Sunni and Shia "extremists" opposed to the US, on the condition that this confrontation does not spill beyond Syria's borders."

[And on June 30:](#)

"It was clear that US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov had reached a preliminary framework agreement over Syria involving a political solution through negotiations and dialogue. [...] However, this proposed conference is to be held without any directing principle or frame of reference, except for the idea of a transitional government of unknown powers. [...] Europe immediately declared its support for the agreement, along with China and the regional powers that support the regime, and the Arab League as well. On the other hand, the Arab states that support the Syrian revolution did not express much enthusiasm for the agreement. This agreement places the Syrian people in front of a new, difficult juncture dominated by the notion of an international solution imposed from above, according to which the National Coalition would be pressured to engage in an unsatisfactory settlement, while the US pressures the Arab states and Turkey to stop the provision of military aid, regardless of its meager size."

The reason the US decided to negotiate with Russia seems to be less because Assad was winning - one does not negotiate with one's enemy when one is losing, unless one absolutely has to - but because the Islamist groups in Syria were getting out of control, and on Israel's doorstep. The balance of power between Assad and the Islamists has gradually tipped in favor of Assad, therefore upsetting US Plan B. Many battle-hardened radical Islamists, routed by the Syrian army, have started leaving Syria and flooding into other parts of the region, including the Sinai and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is terrified by the presence of these returning fighters who are angry at the Saudi collaboration with the West, and who risk destabilizing the regime. Israel is terrified of the fighters amassing on its borders in the Sinai. The US has been training Syrians along the borders of Israel and Jordan, less to fight the Syrian army than to keep the Islamists out.

Assad is less a threat to Israel, ultimately – the Assads always tolerated Israel – than political Islam gaining traction at its doorstep. This, and the threat the returning Islamist fighters pose to Saudi Arabia, seems to be what triggered the decision to switch plans again and to negotiate with the Russians. Hastening a transition that did not involve the Muslim Brotherhood would thus be preferable to either allowing the country to remain the incubator for radicals who would then disperse throughout the region if Assad won, or allowing the country to form a link in the Sunni chain from Turkey to Egypt, if the Islamists won. The very decision to negotiate with Russia betrays a certain panic on the part of the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Geneva conference now seems unlikely to happen anytime soon if at all, given that the US seems to feel that this may not be beneficial toward its ends of both controlling the Islamists and overthrowing Assad. Those ends are being pursued in other ways: a reworked Syrian strategy, the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, and the regime change in Qatar. On June 24, Qatari Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani handed over power to his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. According to the director of the Arab Times, Osama Fawzi, a former leading official of the Qatari information ministry, whose June 24 revelations were subsequently taken up by many Arabic-language news services, an eviction notice had been served to the Emir and to the Prime Minister of Qatar directly by a CIA agent, after documents recovered in Bin Laden's hideout revealed that the main financing source of Al-Qaida was a Qatari citizen, a cousin of the Minister of Culture. Whether or not this was true or was new news to the US, the timing for this transfer of power does not seem to be random.

The former Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani, 61, is not in ailing health; his stepping down was spun to portray a voluntary abdication of power in favor of the younger generation, in keeping with the Arab Spring's rejuvenation of forces. According to Fawzi, the Emir was given the choice either to give the reins to his son or have Qatari assets throughout the world frozen due to links with terrorist activities. Apparently his overthrow was because he had gone too far in his support for the Islamist fighters in Syria and Islamist governments in Tunisia and Egypt.

On July 2, the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood continued in another Gulf state, the United Arab Emirates, which sentenced 64 Brotherhood leaders to jail for seeking to overthrow the regime. And on July 3, Morsi was deposed in Egypt. On July 6, a Saudi agent, Ahmed Assi al-Jarba, was elected to lead the Syrian National Coalition, wresting power from the Brotherhood. On July 8, Ghassan Hitto, the Prime Minister of the Syrian "interim government" formed by the Coalition, an agent of Qatar and the Brotherhood, resigned. The Muslim Brotherhood is clearly out of favor with the imperialists. In this light, it is impossible to see the events in Egypt as anything other than as a premeditated coup d'état participating in an overall US-Saudi-Israeli strategy shift in the region.

This fact explains why both Bashar al-Assad and the Saudi monarchy, not exactly allies, welcomed the overthrow of Morsi. The new Emir of Qatar also congratulated the new government. Tunisia and Turkey, on the other hand, condemned the coup d'état. The fact that the US continued to work together with its former allies until the end does not constitute a sign that it actually remained faithful to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood; if there was a plot to depose them, the US would surely not have shown that. What is notable is rather the fact that the US and Israel did not wait until elections to try to kick them out through the electoral path. This signifies that the situation was perceived as urgently

dangerous.

Tension between the US/Israel and the Brotherhood began early on in Morsi's mandate, as Egypt began immediately to reopen the Gaza terminal at Rafah, albeit on an intermittent basis. One of the first acts of the new transitional government in Egypt was to close it. Although Morsi showed prudence in his dealings with Israel, his government clearly had the intention of pulling more weight in the region and was slowly – if ineptly – working toward a greater geopolitical role. He kicked out imperialist NGOs, and gave a timid support to the Palestinians. The former Emir of Qatar had showed support for the Palestinian cause, and the new Emir announced his continuation of that support the day after he took power. However, according to the Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot (YNet), citing a Qatari source, the new Emir has had multiple secret meetings with Israeli agents during the past five months. The future of Qatar's foreign policy is yet to be seen. Israel, for its part, has expressed fear that the US will cut off aid to Egypt's military, but this – like Senator McCain's calls to cut it off – is probably bluff.

The – credible – story is told that the Muslim Brotherhood, during their discussions with the US before coming to power in Egypt, made clear to US agents what they wanted as their part of the deal in an alliance: a new Marshall Plan for Egypt, bringing it out of underdevelopment. The US agents apparently responded that that was impossible. When asked what the US could then offer, the US answered: favorable terms on credit lines from the Gulf states. If true, this story reveals a certain disjunction between the two parties even before the election of Morsi. The US, in debt and globally in decline both in terms of hard and soft power, could offer nothing substantial to its ally; and the Brotherhood showed ambitions that went beyond being simply a puppet. Under the Brotherhood Egypt received no real aid from US allies Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, or Kuwait, but only from Qatar. After the coup, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait have promised \$12 billion in aid.

In April, 2013, Ethiopia announced a new project to dam the Blue Nile, the “Grand Renaissance Dam,” which would cut off 20% of Egypt's water for the 3-5 years it took to fill an enormous reservoir. Such a project, undertaken by a US colony state and largely financed by Israel, would not only severely harm Egypt during that time but would also install a convenient on-off switch for Egypt's (and Sudan's) lifeline, thus keeping a permanent knife to the neck of any future governments. National sovereignty would be permanently undermined. One of Morsi's last actions was to work to stop the dam project in the name of national security, almost threatening military action against Ethiopia.

Another of his last actions was to call for the jihad in Syria, showing a surprising degree of diplomatic naiveté. The Islamist fighters in the Sinai, tolerated by Morsi but repressed by the Egyptian army, may be one of the triggers of the coup. The abrupt overthrow of the Islamists in Egypt and their financing source in Qatar means that they will be even angrier at the US/Israel and possibly less inclined to play by the rules of the democratic game. But rather than discrediting democracy in itself, this coup further discredits the US/West who orchestrated it, and will have the beneficial effect of removing any lingering doubts the Islamists may have as to the trustworthiness of an alliance with the US.

The reworked US strategy in Syria seems now to be to contain and defund the Islamists while stepping up support for the FSA. With the funding of the rebels now considered to be under control after the palace coup in Qatar, the West has given itself the green light to arm the opposition, that is, the FSA. The Saudis have shifted their support to the FSA. Whether

the plan (Plan D at least) is now to settle in for a long war of attrition against Assad and Hezbollah, or to attempt to bring in a few military victories in order to improve the West's negotiating stance against Assad and the Russians in view of a "political solution," is an open question. The ambition may be to take control of part of the East of Syria in order eventually to negotiate the break-up of the country, giving Assad a fragment in the West and creating at least one new state in which a Western puppet could be installed.

During the "Friends of Syria" conference hosted on June 22 by Qatar - despite the Emir's imminent resignation - US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the allies were working together "not to seek a military solution. [We seek to] come to the table to find a political settlement." This can be interpreted as saying, perhaps to Qatar, that the West will ensure that the final solution to the conflict will pass through the Western-oriented political opposition, the National Coalition, and not through a military victory of the Islamists.

Saudi Arabia, the US and other "Friends of Syria" are thus talking about launching a new offensive starting in late summer, sending in large amounts of new weapons. However, it is unclear whom exactly they are going to arm. The FSA is very weak in terms of manpower and training, and according to an unnamed French source quoted in *Le Monde* on July 26, they "need more than just weapons." And even if the West managed to take part or all of the country through a "political" solution, a puppet government would face the wrath of not only the Syrian nationalists but the anti-Western Islamists. The US may or may not have the stomach for an all-out proxy war with Russia, and may in fact be testing Russia's limits; but the Russians have been clear that they will not allow Syria to fall. However, even if the "Friends of Syria" do not actually achieve a durable solution to their liking, they have already succeeded in the goal of maiming the country and its economy, and they could go much further toward that goal without actually winning.

Given that the US has just succeeded in a military coup d'état in Egypt and a palace coup in Qatar, to what extent is it justified to talk about the decline of US power in the region? One might argue the opposite. But the very fact that these manoeuvres were necessary is one strong indication of US decline. The US has lost an ally, that is, a huge swath of the forces of political Islam. This is very significant, and it is excellent news for the international Left, for this ultimately weakens the forces of imperialism.

Despite the recent behind-the-scenes US-Israeli-Saudi manipulation in Egypt, involving the pro-Western liberal-mafioso opposition, pro-Mubarak elements, and what seem to be color revolution tactics in the mass demonstrations, the secular Left is very strong there.

The future will tell whether the pro-Western liberal oligarchy instrumentalized the demonstrating Left toward its ends of retaking power, or whether the Left will have used the pro-Western liberals and army for its own ends of kicking out the Brotherhood and getting a chance to take power itself. But in any case the Left should not be duped about what happened and who its allies are. Between an anti-Western reactionary force like the Brotherhood and a pro-Western liberal force like one now in power, the anti-imperialist and progressive Left should not take sides. It should take this coup as a warning about what can happen if a government which does not control the army attempts policies that diverge from the US-dictated line.

Egypt remains an occupied country as long as the US pays for its military, and so the Left should not rely upon the army. But the Egyptian people will soon have the chance to elect a new government and rewrite their constitution, and this gives great hope for the chances of the secular Left working toward sovereignty. May they seize this chance and keep it.

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