



Fragmenting Under Pressure

Egypt's Islamists Since Morsi's Ouster

By Hardin Lang, Mokhtar Awad, and Brian Katulis March 2014

Introduction and summary

In January, Egyptians voted in the third constitutional referendum since the 2011 revolution. The ballot was a milestone in the interim authorities' roadmap for the next steps in Egypt's political transition. Only 10 days later, Cairo was rocked by a wave of bombings that killed at least six people and injured more than 70.¹ The juxtaposition of the referendum and the most dangerous terrorist attacks in recent memory provides a poignant reminder of the security threats and political polarization that grip Egypt today.

On one side of the divide sit the military-backed interim authorities that currently have the upper hand and enjoy popular support in the struggle for power. On the other side sit the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist supporters, who until eight months ago led Egypt's first-ever Islamist-dominated government. The military is the cornerstone of the Egyptian state. The Muslim Brotherhood is the country's oldest and until recently most organized religious and social force. The dynamic between the two groups has shaped Egypt's transition since a popular uprising threw out then President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and will continue to determine Egypt's long-term stability and prosperity.

The January constitutional referendum continued the dramatic reversal of fortune for the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement that shares an ideological and historical lineage with a wide range of Islamist groups, including some of the most radical in the region. The ouster of the President Mohamed Morsi by the Egyptian military and the ensuing crackdown has profoundly affected the Brotherhood and the Islamist landscape more broadly. The Brotherhood faces significant challenges to its coherence and structure. It has already parted ways with the country's second-largest Islamist movement—the Salafi Da'wa—and new Islamist forces are taking shape. Some of these groups are asserting themselves in confrontations with the state in the streets and have turned to violence. Some are challenging their more established counterparts, while others are planning to compete in the next round of elections.

To better understand the impact of President Morsi's ouster on the Islamist landscape, a research team from the Center for American Progress interviewed more than 30 leading politicians, Islamists, and observers in the Egyptian cities of Cairo and Alexandria over a two-week period in December 2013 and conducted follow-up interviews in January 2014. Those interviewed included current and former mid-level to senior-level members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi Da'wa and its Nour Party, other Salafi movements, Islamist youth with responsibility for the street demonstrations or other forms of protest, and non-Islamist politicians.

This report provides a snapshot of current trends among Islamists in Egypt, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It offers an overview of the enduring weaknesses and divisions that plague the country's political landscape; explores the impact of the military's overthrow of the previous government and repression of a broad range of independent political actors, including the Muslim Brotherhood; and examines the Salafi response to these events. It concludes with a summary analysis of the situation and suggested recommendations for U.S. policymakers. In brief, the report's key findings include:

- **Egypt's political transition remains in a fragile state, affected by growing security threats and enduring economic challenges.** More than three years after the fall of the Mubarak regime, Egypt remains locked in an unresolved struggle for power. The country currently faces security threats and economic challenges, such as widespread unemployment, mounting government debt, and problems with basic services. Excessive spending on energy and food subsidies, fiscal deficits, pressures on foreign currency reserves, and low tax-collection rates continue at a time when demographic and social pressures from a youth bulge trying to enter the workforce are increasing. Egypt's leaders face overwhelming challenges in meeting the basic needs of its citizens. The polarized, dysfunctional, and increasingly violent political landscape will impede progress on these fundamental issues.
- **The landscape of political Islam in Egypt is fragmenting.** The Muslim Brotherhood considers the Salafi Da'wa to be traitorous—a view shared by smaller Salafi parties. The Da'wa sees the Brotherhood as incompetent and delusional. Under pressure from the current governing authorities, independent political forces are fracturing and, in some cases, seeking to realign themselves. This trend is particularly acute amongst Egypt's political Islamists. A trend toward increased radicalization and violence appears to be underway.

- **The Muslim Brotherhood lacks a strategic vision and faces a historic challenge.** The Brotherhood seeks to disrupt and exhaust the state but has no clear understanding of what victory means or how to achieve it. Its reliance on youth and outsiders to mobilize in the streets threatens its traditional structure and hierarchy. Less than a year after Morsi's ouster, the Muslim Brotherhood exhibits few signs of serious introspection and lessons learned from its time in power. The crackdown is rapidly closing off options for those inside the Brotherhood who still consider politics and dialogue to be part of the solution.
- **The Salafi Da'wa has aligned itself with the current ruling powers and remains a key political actor.** The Salafi Da'wa is isolated vis-à-vis other Islamists but displays a strong tactical ability to maneuver. Its political wing—the Nour Party—is the only Islamist party that remains above ground. Nour might be better organized than the non-Islamist parties, but its failure to mobilize strong support among its ranks for the constitutional referendum should be a cause for concern amongst its leadership.
- **The threat of continued violent radicalization is real.** The Muslim Brotherhood is increasingly structurally incoherent in Egypt's largest urban areas. Radicalization is taking place at the individual level both inside and outside the organization. This trend is clearest among the youth. Egypt is poised to experience the rise of more militant strands of Islamism, and the specter of terrorist violence experienced in the 1980s and 1990s under former Presidents Anwar Sadat and Mubarak has already returned.
- **A strong overt political role for the Egyptian military risks its independence and standing with the Egyptian people.** The security institutions may be exposing themselves to significant risk of backlash as they continue to close down space for basic freedoms of speech and assembly while at the same time taking ownership of Egypt's herculean social and economic challenges.
- **Regional forces are gaining influence.** Until Egypt becomes more cohesive and unified, regional forces in the Gulf and Turkey will seek leverage and influence among those actors inside Egypt with whom they are most aligned.

These trends leave U.S. policymakers with few good options and limited influence. Nevertheless, Egypt remains one of the most important strategic priorities for U.S. policy in the Middle East. At a time when the Obama administration is focused on Iran's nuclear program, advancing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, and the growing threats posed by Syria's civil war, the security, political, and economic trends in Egypt will have a longstanding impact on stability in the region. Going forward, Washington should consider the following actions:

- **Advocate for political inclusion as a means to support stability, effective governance, and economic growth.** The United States should insist that interim authorities open up political space to all nonviolent political actors, end the suppression of dissent, and cease the brutality of their response to the street protests. The Obama administration should support the certification of Egypt's democratic progress by enabling assistance to flow only if the ruling authorities take serious steps toward greater respect for basic rights and freedoms.
- **Promote political dialogue.** The United States should encourage the government to open a broad-based dialogue that includes all nonviolent political actors. While true reconciliation may not be possible, dialogue and de-escalation should be a top priority.
- **Engage the Gulf region on the Egyptian economy.** The United States should renew its engagement with Egypt's partners in the Gulf to build better coordination in support of Egypt's economy. It should work to ensure that the support international actors provide to Egypt helps build a framework for inclusive politics and open economic competition.
- **Reform U.S. security assistance to help the country meet today's pressing security challenges.** The U.S. security assistance program is not well positioned to help Egypt meet the threats the country currently faces. The United States and Egypt should develop a common security agenda to address the core roots of militancy by developing stronger tools to root out violent elements. There should be a renewed focus on strengthening police forces that operate with greater respect for the rule of law and basic civil liberties.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

