



Egypt is too big to ignore

The varied reactions to the Cairo events reveal much about the uncertainty and instability that stalks the region

MORE THAN 20 years have gone by since Egypt played a crucial role in mobilizing a coalition of Arab states to back the US-led military campaign to roll back Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait. Since then, however, Egypt's regional weight has declined precipitously, due primarily to its sclerotic political and economic order that has left the vast majority of Egypt's 80 million people struggling to get by.

Still, as recent events have once again shown, Egypt is simply too big to ignore. What happens there reverberates throughout the region; hence, the drama that played out on the streets of Cairo and in the corridors of power were keenly watched by Egypt's neighbors, and beyond. The varied reactions reveal much about the current uncertainty and instability that stalks the region.

For Saudi Arabia, the removal of Mohamed Morsi from power and the subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood was a moment of great satisfaction. The Saudis had been appalled and frightened by the massive 2011 demonstrations that toppled Hosni Mubarak, and by what they viewed as America's abandonment of a long-standing close ally.

Since then, the Brotherhood's ascent – epitomized by Morsi's election, and the prominence of like-minded Islamist groups elsewhere (Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and within the Syrian opposition) – has further unnerved the Saudis. Although the Saudis made common cause with the Brotherhood against Nasser's radical pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s, the Brotherhood's republican, modernist Islamist ideology stands in sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy, legitimized by puritan *wahhabi* Islam, and holds considerable potential attractiveness for disaffected Saudis.

Thus, although Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey have all been leading players in the camp of Sunni Arab states facing off



A Cairo woman signs a petition in support of the Tamarud anti-Morsi movement

against Shi'ite Iran and its Syrian, Lebanese Hezbollah and Shi'ite Iraqi allies, the Saudis remain keenly aware of the challenges emanating from within the Sunni Islamic world, both via political Islam and al-Qaeda-type Jihadism.

Within a week of the military's seizure of power, the Saudis, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait together pledged \$12 billion dollars to shore up Egypt's collapsing economy, about as concrete an endorsement as one can get. It was also a pointed statement directed against fellow Gulf Cooperation Council member and sometimes rival Qatar, whose wealth has enabled it to punch above its weight during the Arab Spring events, particularly on behalf of the Brotherhood and Islamist movements.

Turkey's Islamist authorities, by contrast, were appalled by the Egyptian events, viewing them as a blow to democracy. The military's intervention in Egypt was a reminder of frequent past behavior by the Turkish military, while the massive Egyptian popular protests that preceded it were uncomfortably similar, in message and degree of determination, to the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul against the Turkish authorities.

Conversely, the Turkish protesters and the secular political opposition took heart from the Egyptian events. And so did portions of

the fractious Syrian opposition that oppose the Muslim Brotherhood's dominance of the anti-Assad forces. In Tunisia, secular opposition groups sought to emulate the Egyptian Tamarud movement that organized the demonstrations to replace Morsi.

Anti-Hamas Palestinians were similarly pleased by the loss of the Gaza-based Hamas's main patron. The Egyptian military views Hamas as actively complicit in subversive activities by radical Salafi elements in Sinai, and has initiated a large-scale operation to reassert control there. Even under Morsi, the movement of people and goods between Gaza and Sinai was limited, and is now likely

to be further restricted.

Western analysts and secular-leftist commentators in the Arab world were quick to speak of the strategic blow to political Islam throughout the region. Others, of course, viewed the removal of Morsi as a blow to nascent democratic trends that threatened to drive disillusioned Islamists into the shadows of underground violent reaction, à la Algeria in the 1990s. Such punditry makes for good copy, but obscures more than it reveals. Just as there was no Arab "Spring," there was no subsequent Islamic "Winter." And mass mobilization to topple governments hardly constitutes democracy, which requires functioning, self-restraining institutions and a high degree of political and social consensus on rules and rights.

As US editor Adam Garfinkle perceptively notes in his journal, *The American Interest*, what Egypt requires for now is a "praetorian democracy," an under-institutionalized democracy whose incubation period is protected by the military. But even getting to that requires a Herculean effort and a heretofore undemonstrated level of enlightened leadership from all sides. ■

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