The Follies of Democracy Promotion

THE AMERICAN ADVENTURE IN EGYPT

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"If you want to put Obama in a bad mood, tell him he has to go to a Situation Room meeting about Egypt." This striking statement by an administration official appeared in an article accompanying Jeffrey Goldberg's "The Obama Doctrine" in *The Atlantic*.[1] Analyzing the president's worldview, David Frum described him as a man disappointed with the world. America's military leaders and foreign policy establishment, world leaders, both allies and foes—no one escaped the president's ire at a world that had failed to live up to his expectations. In the flurry of analysis focusing on larger questions, the comment about Egypt received no attention. Such disregard was unfortunate. In a long list of Barack Obama's disappointments, Egypt ranked high. It was after all in that country's capital that Obama had given his famed speech in 2009, promising a new beginning with the Muslim world. Less than two years later, the Egyptian people were lavishly praised from the White House's podium. "Egyptians have inspired us," declared a jubilant Obama on February 11, 2011. "The people of Egypt have spoken, their voices have been heard, and Egypt will never be the same." Little did the president realize how ridiculous his statements would soon appear to be.

Obama may have grown disappointed with Egypt, but he was hardly the only one. Democratic and Republican policymakers alike, foreign policy wonks and newspaper editorial boards, and even regular Americans found the country's turn of events astonishing. How could a population which had "turned the wheels of history at a blinding pace," as the president had declared, revert to a more brutal dictatorship than the one it rose against? This was not how things were supposed to turn out. The president's alter ego, Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, had confidently prophesied that despite setbacks, "the trajectory of change is in the right direction."

To say that the disappointment was mutual is an understatement. Egypt's president, Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, was counting the days remaining until Obama left the Oval Office. His list of frustrations was long: the Obama administration had embraced the Muslim Brotherhood during its short stint in power and continued to treat it as a legitimate political player in the country, despite el-Sisi's insistence that it was nothing but a

terrorist group. The administration held el-Sisi at arm's length, denying him the official visit to Washington that he deeply coveted. It had withheld military equipment and aid at the moment of Egypt's most desperate need and it continued to criticize el-Sisi's rule and human rights record. In this embracing and distancing, in words and deeds, Obama had proven he was no friend to Egypt. No wonder el-Sisi welcomed Donald Trump's candidacy so eagerly during the campaign, becoming one of only two foreign leaders who met him as a candidate and rushing to be the first to congratulate him after his stunning victory.

It may be too early to write the story of the great sandstorm that the deserts of the Arabic-speaking world have seen in the past six and a half years. The sand has not settled yet. Many a structure will be buried, and layers of sand removed from previously buried ones, before the storm ends. But the story of the Obama administration's adventure in Egypt can now be told. It is a story of fantasy and ignorance, of belief in inevitable historical outcomes and of lack of resolve to bring them about. The story serves as a cautionary tale for the new administration.

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It was not supposed to end this way. Even before he had been elected president, Barack Obama's very candidacy was met with great excitement in Egypt. Arabs had rooted for George W. Bush eight years earlier. His father was well liked in the region, while opponent Al Gore had chosen a Jewish running mate. But enthusiasm had soon turned sour. This time, however, things would be different. Whether it was his life story, improbable rise, anti-Iraq War rhetoric, or the fact that his middle name was Hussein—Egyptians, like others around the world, fell in love with Obama. Writing from Cairo in June 2008, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, in typical hyperbole, declared that Obama's candidacy "has done more to improve America's image abroad . . . than the entire Bush public diplomacy effort for seven years."

In a rare show of solidarity, so did the country's aging dictator. Mubarak had had a difficult relationship with Bush, whom he viewed as naïve with his belief in spreading democracy. The invasion of Iraq, Mubarak could understand, but this whole democracy business was not for him. What do Bush and those naïve Americans know about my people? American pressure for reform, both private and public, annoyed him, as did the reports he was receiving about the increase in programs devoted to democracy promotion in his country. His displeasure was no secret. He had refrained from

visiting Washington since 2004 and, in a rare breach of decorum, had not attended Bush's speech to the World Economic Forum in Sharm El Sheikh in 2008, after being informed that democracy was its main theme. Obama, on the other hand, offered a return to normal. As a candidate, Obama described his strategy as "no longer driven by ideology and politics, but one that is based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground and our interests in the region."

Taking office, Obama seemed to confirm Mubarak's hopes. It is no secret that a cornerstone of Obama's worldview was that America had been too tied to the Middle East, while its future lay in Asia. The importance of the Middle East was diminishing as the American economy became less dependent on Middle Eastern energy resources. Obama had little interest in the Bush "freedom agenda" and certainly viewed his mandate as erasing Bush's mistakes. Democracy promotion was not only a Bush legacy, but also one that Obama understood as deeply tied to the Iraq War, a theme he would state later in his Cairo speech. The administration came to office with four priorities in the Middle East: withdrawing from Iraq, mending relations with the Muslim world, bringing peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, and dealing with Iran's nuclear project. Not only was democracy promotion absent from these or any secondary priorities, but the third objective necessitated Mubarak's help. Mubarak had emerged during the previous two decades as the key peace broker in the region, and an administration prone to believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the center of the region's problems was bound to reach out to him.

As Joshua Muravchik detailed in an essay in *Commentary* in the summer of 2009, Obama and his top officials did their best to stay as far away as possible from Bush's "freedom agenda." In his interview with Al-Arabiya immediately after taking office, Obama did not utter the words democracy or human rights. In June 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made it clear that "conditionality with Egypt is not our policy." If there were any doubt what those words meant, the Obama administration's actions soon provided certainty. Mubarak had grown annoyed with American funding to civil society organizations in Egypt that were not officially registered, and the Obama administration quickly eliminated the funding. The US ambassador to Egypt, Margaret Scobey, argued that the move would "facilitate smoother relations with Egypt." Overall, democracy-promotion funding for Egypt was cut by half. In August 2009, Mubarak visited Washington; a year later, in September 2010, he was once again in the city playing his central-casting role: the Middle Eastern elder statesman helping to broker peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

And then there was the Cairo speech. Everything about the speech was wrong, from the choice of country, the very premise of a Muslim world that needed to be addressed, and treating Egypt—with its long sense of national identity—as nothing more than part of that Muslim world, to insisting that a Muslim Brotherhood delegation be allowed to attend. A year before, Friedman had stated that Obama's election "would mark a sea change in America-Muslim world relations." The president certainly believed that. He had come seeking a new beginning that required some major changes. Much criticism of the speech centered on Obama blaming the tension between Islam and the West on colonialism and the Cold War and declaring "it part of my responsibility as president of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear." But two ideas proved to be the most consequential for Egypt. First, Obama stated that "we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments, provided they govern with respect for all their people." Second, the issue of the rights of non-Muslims in Muslim societies was framed as a question of religious freedom in which "the richness of religious diversity must be upheld," and not as a question of equality and citizenship.

At the time, the contradictions between the Cairo speech and Obama's priorities in the region went largely unnoticed. The president had opened the gate to the United States accepting a Muslim Brotherhood government in the country. Concerns about the group's views or the rights of non-Muslims would take backstage to its participation in the democratic process. On the other hand, the Mubarak regime, which Obama needed for his peace process, viewed the Brotherhood as a mortal enemy. More profoundly, Obama's grandiose views about the transformative nature of his candidacy and rhetoric seemed at odds with a realistic approach to Egypt. Obama had courted two audiences in the region: the man on the street and his oppressor in the palace. At the time, both audiences could be satisfied with the contra-Bush. Soon, however, the contradictions would come to the forefront of the policy debate on Egypt, with profound consequences.

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It is no secret that the Egyptian revolution caught members of the Obama administration by surprise. They were not the only ones. Looking at the region during the waning days of 2010, seasoned observers could hardly have predicted the great tsunami that would result from the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor. True, there were signs that the regional stability was illusory. Secretary Clinton had criticized

Arab leaders for their autocratic rule in a speech in Doha two weeks earlier. But as CIA deputy director Michael Morell later admitted, "We didn't see it reach the boiling point." Even as the Tunisian revolution was under way, the Obama administration was still focused on what it believed to be the core question of the Middle East: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When it came to Egypt, Clinton declared on January 25, 2011, that "our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable." Vice President Joseph Biden went further in a TV interview, insisting that Mubarak was not a dictator. In a matter of days, both would come to regret their statements.

An examination of the State Department's daily press briefings captures the administration's initial reactions. On January 26, after protests had started in Egypt, State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley only spoke in general terms about the country. The next day, following the Egyptian government's decision to cut Internet and mobile services in the country, the administration still had no public message other than, "We are offering our advice to Egypt. But what they do is up to them."[2] Asked whether Egypt should hold elections, Crowley refrained from asking for that, assuring his watchers that no high-level conversations with Egypt had taken place in the last few days: "Our interaction had primarily been through the embassy."

On January 28, Egypt was engulfed in fire as hundreds of thousands of protesters across the country clashed with police forces. By the day's end the police force was routed, a hundred police stations destroyed, prisons attacked, and the army deployed. Egypt was obviously no longer stable.

The turn of events unleashed a heated debate within the administration. On one side of the debate stood every senior official, including Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and CIA Director Leon Panetta, urging caution and restraint. Arab leaders were freaking out over what was happening in Egypt and Mubarak had been a key US ally for nearly thirty years. Moreover, what was to happen in Egypt if Mubarak were to step down? The Muslim Brotherhood was the only strong opposition group. On the other side were Obama's young advisers, none of whom had much knowledge of the region. The details of what was happening in Egypt were of less importance than the larger picture. What was taking place was similar to the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe. Obama's young advisers informed him that the train of history was moving quickly and he needed to ride it. "If this is the tide of history, then you are perfectly positioned to ride the wave," they insisted.[3]

In his memoirs, Secretary Gates detailed his growing frustration with the junior staff of the National Security Council (NSC). A week earlier, Rhodes and his ilk would have been hard pressed to name five cities in Egypt, let alone any of its politicians. But now they all knew exactly what should be done and where the country was heading. The White House Chief of Staff was more honest. "What . . . do I know about Egypt?" he told Gates. The aspiring novelist obviously thought otherwise. Rhodes was adamant that Obama should abandon Mubarak.

The young NSC staffers carried the day. It certainly helped that for the previous two years the NSC had expanded its role considerably, leading to what Gates described as micromanagement of foreign policy. But the issue went beyond turf wars, or the fact that the young NSC staffers were closer to Obama personally, having been with his campaign from the beginning. Obama's lack of a personal relationship with Mubarak also contributed. But what the NSC staff was appealing to was Obama's belief in the arc of history and his own transformative power. The *New Yorker*'s David Remnick provided a little anecdote. Back in 2007, at the start of his campaign, Obama told historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "I have no desire to be one of those presidents who are just on the list . . . I really want to be a president who makes a difference." Every president, of course, cares about his legacy and enacting change. But with Obama, being on the right side of history was not an option—it was destiny.

Beyond riding the train of history before it left the station were two other important factors. The intelligence services and administration departments had failed to predict the uprising, and this made them less dependable sources of information for Obama. Instead, he began to surf blogs and websites dedicated to Middle East policy and consult, as the *New York Times* later wrote, with Friedman and Washington journalist Fareed Zakaria. Outside the Situation Room, the mood was obviously in favor of the demonstrators. How could it not be? On the one side stood an aging dictator and on the other, young, tech-savvy youth. US media were broadcasting live from Tahrir Square and everyone was caught in the great enthusiasm. Facts were of little importance here. William Wordsworth captured the same sentiments during the French Revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!"

Enthusiasm for change, an American trait, was also driven by the kinds of voices Americans heard from the region. Mohamed el-Baradei, billed as the leader of the Egyptian revolution, assured CNN watchers that the Muslim Brotherhood was not

to be feared: "That is a myth that was sold by the Mubarak regime . . . either us or the al-Qaeda types." A previous State Department official detailed how, during the Egyptian revolution, the American embassy staff was barricaded in the embassy, making it very difficult for the administration to get accurate information about what was going on. Who were the protesters? How many people were being killed? Civil society organizations were collecting that data and conveying that information to the world, and that was a critical source of information.

But something else was at play. In June 2009, Iranians took to the streets rejecting the announced results of their presidential elections, and the Obama administration, hoping to reach an accommodation with Iran's leaders on the country's nuclear program, ignored them. According to the *New York Times,* "Obama expressed regret about his muted stance on Iran. There was a feeling of we ain't gonna be behind the curve on this again."[4] Then Egypt happened. In Ryan Lizza's long essay in the *New Yorker,* titled "The Consequentialist," he noted that "some of Obama's White House aides regretted having stood idly by while the Iranian regime brutally suppressed the Green Revolution; Egypt offered a second chance."[5] Obama himself alluded to that link in his May 2011 speech: "Let's remember that the first peaceful protests in the region were in the streets of Tehran . . . the image of a young woman dying in the streets is still seared in our memory."

And so it was. Obama's first public statement on January 28 was noncommittal. "This moment of volatility," he said, "has to be turned into a moment of promise." He had spoken to Mubarak earlier and "told him he has to take concrete steps" and that "the United States will continue to stand up for the rights of the Egyptian people." Three days later, the State Department's spokesman upped the rhetoric: "We've sent a very clear message to Egypt publicly and privately."[6] White House press secretary Robert Gibbs further added that change must happen on top and that the United States expected that non-secular players would be included in the next government. Privately, the administration pinned its hopes on the CIA's Morell, who had opened a back channel to the newly appointed Egyptian vice president, Omar Suleiman. A message was drafted for Suleiman by the White House's Denis McDonough with specific commitments about Mubarak stepping down. Former US ambassador to Egypt Frank Wisner was flown to Cairo with a similar tough message to Mubarak.

It didn't work. Mubarak's sentimental speech on February 1 offered concessions to the demonstrators and he committed to not running for another term, but he did not

offer to step down. "It quickly became clear that Mubarak was heading in a different direction from the Suleiman talking points," an administration official noted.[7] For Obama, who watched the speech live in the Situation Room, "That is not enough. That is just not going to do it." Asked by his advisers what he wanted to see happen in Egypt, Obama declared: "What I want is for the kids in the street to win and for the Google guy to become president. What I think is that this is going to be long and hard." In a subsequent call to Mubarak, Obama pressured him to step down, but was rebuffed. Mubarak angrily told him that naïve Americans didn't understand Egyptian society. Overriding his advisers, Obama decided to reveal the content of the phone call publicly.

On February 1, the president declared that "an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now." Was the president worried about the future trajectory of Egypt? No. "There will be difficult days ahead. Many questions about Egypt's future remain unanswered. But I am confident that the people of Egypt will find these answers." On what basis was Obama building his judgment? The arc of history. "Throughout thousands of years, Egypt has known many moments of transformation. The voices of the Egyptian people tell us that this is one of those moments." What did "now" mean? Gibbs declared, "Now started yesterday." Were Omar Suleiman's meetings with the opposition enough? No. "They are not broad enough. They are not credible enough to meet the clear aspirations of the Egyptian people." What did these steps entail? "Irreversible steps I would associate with real, fundamental, and lasting change."

Should the Muslim Brotherhood be part of that transition? Crowley told reporters, "If any group wants to come forward and play a role in a democratic process, a peaceful process, that is their right as Egyptians. It's not for us, the United States, to dictate that." The Brotherhood, after all, is "a fact of life in Egypt." In a phone call with reporters, Rhodes further elaborated that "the process of transition needs to be broadly inclusive, and it should include, again, a broad cross-section of the opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood is a part of that, but they're just one part of it."[8] Here, as elsewhere, Rhodes and his boss were wrong. There was no serious opposition in Egypt beyond the Muslim Brotherhood. Was the administration worried about what all this meant for the peace treaty with Israel? No. Crowley was sympathetic to the new government that would emerge: "Obviously, when a new government is formed, it will have to review its policies . . . with its immediate neighbor." Nothing could stop the train of history from moving.

The administration was hardly alone in its enthusiasm. Across the political spectrum, politicians and analysts could not hide their joy at developments in Egypt. The democracy-promotion industry was up in arms. Thomas Malinowski, at the time the Washington director of Human Rights Watch and later assistant secretary of state for democracy and human rights, declared that "the administration has to put everything on the line now." The euphoria would lead to embarrassment. CIA Director Panetta testified to Congress on February 10 that "Mubarak would step down by the end of the day." He later clarified that he had received his information from television reports. When Mubarak did quit the next day, Israeli ambassador Michael Oren, who was in the White House, describes in his memoirs the jubilant scene in the NSC as Mubarak resigned, with NSC staff members high-fiving each other.

It was left, however, to the president's rhetoric to capture the moment. "There are few moments in our lives in which we have the privilege to witness history taking place. This is one of those moments. This is one of those times. The people of Egypt have spoken, their voices have been heard, and Egypt will never be the same . . . over the last few weeks, the wheel of history turned at a blinding pace . . . we saw a new generation emerge . . . Egyptians have inspired us." This historical moment had taken place before. "We can't help but hear the echoes of history, echoes from Germans tearing down a wall, Indonesian students taking to the streets, Gandhi leading his people down the path of justice." As a Brookings Institution study noted, "This was a historic moment for Obama, not just for the Egyptian people."[9]

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But what would happen to Egypt after Mubarak resigned? To answer that question, the administration turned to history, not of Egypt but of faraway lands. As the *New York Times* wrote, "Obama ordered staff members to study transitions in fifty to sixty countries to find precedents for those underway in Tunisia and Egypt. They found that Egypt is analogous to South Korea, the Philippines and Chile."[10] The whole undertaking was remarkable. The belief that what Egypt was witnessing was a transition to democracy and not the collapse of state institutions framed the discussion from the very beginning and determined the framework of the policy that would be adopted. The suggestion that developments in the Arabic-speaking world would follow those elsewhere betrayed a mindset that did not view culture, history, or religion as relevant. The three countries chosen were, of course, successful transitions to democracy—at least until last year's elections in the Philippines. But

they shared another important attribute: none of them had a religiously based political movement like the Muslim Brotherhood. To imagine that Egypt would follow any of these countries' paths was to assume that the Brotherhood was just another political party and not an Islamist vanguard organization. That was exactly what the Obama administration believed.

To be fair to Obama, he was hardly alone in his newfound enthusiasm for democracy promotion, which had been developed as one of the tools deployed by the United States in the ideological fight with communism during the Cold War and had become a goal in itself afterward. The 1990s were a moment of great enthusiasm. Democracy was on the march in countries that for decades had been under the Soviet yoke. In Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and even Africa, new countries were added to the growing list of democracies. Only one region lagged behind, resisting the third wave of democracy: the broader Middle East.

And then came the 9/11 attacks. In the quest to explain what had taken place, a new argument gained strength: Osama bin Laden and his ilk were the products of the lack of freedom in the Middle East. Terrorism was the product of state repression, and the antidote was democracy. It mattered little that Islamism had been born in Egypt at its freest period before 1952. The argument appealed to all sides of the political spectrum. For those convinced that hard power alone was inadequate to fight terrorism, democracy promotion stressed soft-power capabilities. For those unwilling to confront the region's pathologies and deep hatreds, democracy promotion was premised on universal values and humanity's natural yearning for freedom. Not only did this promotion become a centerpiece of the Bush administration's Middle East policy, but the very same organizations and techniques that had been deployed in Eastern Europe and Latin America were copied. A new organization was added to the list—the Middle East Partnership Initiative—but otherwise the same individuals, programs, and mindsets were replicated. Culture, history, and religion mattered little. What worked there could work here.

But the Obama administration's newly found commitment to democracy promotion and transitions to democracy was coupled with another problematic belief. Despite developments in the Middle East, Obama refused to yield his central belief that the United States should not get involved in the Middle East. As Vali Nasr has noted in his book, *The Dispensable Nation,* "Obama remained intent upon leaving the Middle East, and he was not going to let himself be distanced from that mission

by sudden eruptions of pro-democracy protests, teetering dictators, and looming civil wars." In Asia lay America's future and the focus should be there. According to Defense Secretary Ash Carter, the president "consistently asks, even in the midst of everything else that's going on, where are we in the Asia-Pacific rebalance? Where are we in terms of resources? He's been extremely consistent in that, even in times of Middle East tension."

This was not simply a matter of leaving the Middle East to its own devices. Another key Obama belief was at play here—that the United States was incapable of shaping outcomes overseas, and that when it attempted to do so, things only got worse. Writer Jeffrey Goldberg captured that sentiment clearly: "I came to see Obama as a president who has grown steadily more fatalistic about the constraints on America's ability to direct global events." Obama informed a US senator, "There is no way we should commit to governing the Middle East. That would be a basic, fundamental mistake." In reality, of course, no one was asking the United States to govern the Middle East. Between micromanagement and detachment existed a wide gulf and many options. It's a pity Obama never realized that simple fact.

The result was not only the initial, flawed strategic vision that viewed the region through a transition to democracy, but the lack of a strategic plan. This became clear in Obama's major speech on the Arab Spring on May 19, 2011, which served as the guideline for his administration's approach to it. The speech was naturally high on rhetoric: "There are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years. In America, think of the defiance of those patriots in Boston who refused to pay taxes to a King, or the dignity of Rosa Parks as she sat courageously in her seat."

Obama then posed the central question of "what role America will play as this story unfolds." The answer was clear: "It will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy." But how would the United States government go about achieving that objective? Obama listed a lot of policy suggestions: developing networks of entrepreneurs, making exchanges in education, fostering cooperation in science and technology, combating disease, and focusing on trade. There was also a World Bank and IMF plan to help economies, debt relief for Egypt, enterprise funds, and a comprehensive Trade and Investment Partnership Initiative in the Middle East and North Africa. The list was long, but

there was something clearly missing. There was nothing there about politics, beyond a line about assistance to civil society organizations, including those that may not be officially sanctioned.

The United States would attempt to help these countries economically, but when it came to questions of constitutions and forms of government, civic values and liberal principles, it would play no role and had no strategy. As Nasr noted, Obama "did not know whether the Arab Spring would lead to ubiquitous democracy or a prolonged period of instability, but regardless, he was determined that America would not try to influence the outcome." Arabs would have to figure these things out by themselves. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had initially been thrilled with Obama's candidacy, later described the president in those terms: "He doesn't strategize. He sermonizes."

What followed was an endless train wreck. If the United States was unwilling to guide the region's transition, who should play that role? For a while, Obama placed his bet on Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Before the Arab Spring, Obama had viewed Erdogan as the kind of moderate Muslim leader who would be capable of bridging the gap between the Muslim world and the West. Now Erdogan would get an expanded role, that of regional leader.

Erdogan's regional leadership role meant, of course, the embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the administration had shown no signs of rejecting that. In the May speech, Obama had said that "we must also build on our efforts to broaden our engagement beyond elites." It quickly became apparent that this meant the Muslim Brotherhood. Given that the administration, as the Cairo speech indicated, viewed Egypt as part of a Muslim world and not as a nation-state with a unique history and sense of identity, the worldview required viewing the Brotherhood as not only an authentic representation of the country's Muslim majority population, but the only possibly authentic one. The small circles of liberals and seculars were Westernized elites who had no grassroots support in the country, and election results in Egypt reinforced that narrative. If the United States was to build a strong relationship with Egypt, it had to embrace the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Embrace them it certainly did. What started as shy contacts at the junior level in October 2011 soon became a flurry of connections. Numerous officials from the administration and Congress soon paid visits to the Brotherhood's leadership. No

attempt at limiting contacts to the Brotherhood's political party was made, as visitors met with the group's Supreme Guide. Nor was the Brotherhood the only Islamist group the administration was willing to engage. In June 2012, a parliamentarian from the US-designated terrorist group Gama'a Islamiya was invited for meetings with the NSC and State Department. The National Democratic Institute, the democracy-promotion arm of the Democratic Party, was even willing to provide training before the parliamentary elections for members of the Salafi Nour Party. Now it was all about participating in elections. As Colin Dueck states in his book, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today,* an administration official described a Brotherhood delegation visiting Washington this way: "They all had PhDs from American universities, and said the right things."

With the election of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi to the Egyptian presidency, the administration not only placed its bet on him, but did its best to help him succeed, with the deputy secretary of state leading a delegation of American companies to Cairo to shore up the new government economically. Nothing could stand in the way of the administration's determination to embrace Morsi: not a discovered statement by him calling Jews apes and pigs, not an attack on the US embassy on the anniversary of 9/11 in which al-Qaeda's flag was raised on the grounds, not guilty verdicts for forty-three nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers including a dozen Americans, and certainly not the attack on the Coptic cathedral. When Morsi issued a presidential decree giving himself absolute powers, leading to mass protests by the opposition, Obama urged opposition leaders to join in a dialogue with Morsi without preconditions.

The administration's determination to embrace the Brotherhood would lead the US ambassador to Egypt, Anne Patterson, to declare in a speech two weeks before planned demonstrations against Morsi that "some say that street action will produce better results than elections. To be honest, my government and I are deeply skeptical . . . Egypt needs stability to get its economic house in order, and more violence on the streets will do little more than add new names to the lists of martyrs." In an interview with *Al Ahram* a month before the protests, the only concern on Patterson's mind was Egypt's deteriorating economic condition; the only criticism she was willing to offer regarding the Brotherhood's conduct in power was that "the performance from the economic perspective left a lot to be desired." The ambassador would go out of her way to dismiss concerns about human rights violations under the Brotherhood: "We do not agree with claims that human rights violations are worse than ever under the new

regime." Even growing sexual assaults were dismissed as exaggerated: "People are less scared and more willing to report sexual abuses."

When Morsi was removed from power by the Egyptian military a month later, Ambassador Oren, present once again in the NSC, describes the scene: "In place of high-fives and exhilaration came distraught faces and silence." On whether Morsi had lost his backing, Obama replied, "We don't make those decisions just by counting the number of heads in a protest march." Mubarak certainly didn't appreciate the irony. The administration's fantasy world was on full display, with Obama urging the military "to avoid any arbitrary arrest of President Morsi and his supporters." That is not the way coups usually go. When tanks are moved, the man removed does not gather his belongings and go home.

It hardly occurred to the Obama administration that by fully embracing the Brotherhood and not putting any preconditions on the relationship, it only removed constraints on the Brotherhood's behavior and reinforced its worst impulses. With America not objecting to the Brotherhood assuming power in Egypt, the group could renege on its promises not to seek a majority in parliament or to run a presidential candidate. Instead of moderating the Brotherhood's policy choices by engaging them, the administration in reality had strengthened the group's hardline impulses. Why be moderate, if no one is pressuring you to be?

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Today a new administration occupies the halls of power in Washington. Like his predecessor, Donald Trump's improbable election victory has excited Egypt's current ruler. El-Sisi is betting on Trump to reverse the disastrous trajectory of the American-Egyptian alliance. His list of expectations is long, from economic to military needs. But, above all, he wants recognition that he is viewed as legitimate and an ally, recognition that the Obama administration long denied him. Trump has already shown that he understands the Egyptian leader's psychology, inviting him to the White House for the state visit he long coveted, while pressuring him privately for the release of an Egyptian-American NGO worker unjustly held by the Egyptian regime for more than three years. There is great potential in the trust the two leaders have forged.

But there is also great danger. Trump may be immune to the fantasies of the Obama administration, with its belief in an inevitable march of progress and transition to

democracy, but other illusions still hold sway in Washington policy circles. These include illusions regarding Egypt's role in the region as a leader of the Arabic-speaking world; of Egypt as a stable ally; and of Egypt as a Sunni power. As the Obama administration's adventure in Egypt points out, long-held illusions that ignore facts and developments are no basis for an effective strategy. The truth of the matter is that Egypt is no longer the region's pacesetter. It is no longer a regional competitor, but rather the region's greatest prize in the ongoing competition for the Middle East's future. The country is not as stable as some assume, and its national cohesion and strong sense of identity should not be taken for granted. El-Sisi's call for a religious revolution has won him praise in Washington, but he has neither the will nor the ability to bring it about. The Trump administration should base its strategy toward Egypt not on Egypt as it should be but on Egypt as it is. The major question of Egyptian politics today is not whether the country will transition to democracy—that was never an option in the past seven years and is still not an option today—but rather, how Egypt's slow descent into the regional abyss can be prevented.

If this scenario is to be averted, the American-Egyptian alliance must be reinvigorated. Beyond any specific policy disagreements between the two countries throughout the years, the weakness of the alliance stems from the failure of Washington to build a constituency for the United States in Egypt. As anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories overtook the country, no one in Egypt was willing to stand for the United States, defending the importance of the alliance. Engagement with Egyptian society should not be limited to Cairo or to the business community, but the United States should make an effort to reach wider spectrums of Egyptian society. The United States did it before. President Nixon was met in Egypt during his visit in 1974 with cheering crowds. Before his visit, Egyptian villages received wheat packages with the US flag on them and new ambulances, gifts from USAID, drove in Cairo's streets.

Central to strengthening the American-Egyptian alliance is addressing the growing anti-Americanism head-on. Conspiracy theories are hardly new to Egypt, but the intensity and scope of these theories about the US role is unprecedented. These conspiracy theories are not merely the belief of a segment of society, large or small, but rather shape the regime's worldview and influence its behavior. The widespread belief in conspiracy theories about the United States increases hostility, threatens its security, and hinders US efforts to advance its interests across the globe. Several steps are needed. The US embassy should offer a correction to every anti-American story appearing in the Egyptian media, and those who actively spread such stories

and refuse to correct them should pay a price. A journalist consistently spreading conspiracy theories about the United States should not get invited to the US embassy Fourth of July party and he should not receive a visa to go shopping in America. Alhurra, the US-based satellite TV channel, should be revitalized to provide fact-based news for Egypt and the region as a whole. Above all, President el-Sisi should give a major speech making the case for the US-Egyptian alliance, detailing what America has done to help Egypt and refuting anti-American conspiracy theories. If he is committed to the alliance and wants US economic and military aid, he should be required to make the case for America to his people.

In its attempt to engage Egypt, the United States should utilize the close ties between the country and the United Arab Emirates. While the United States and the UAE do not see eye to eye on everything in Egypt, the UAE is similarly frustrated with el-Sisi's failure to enact necessary reforms. The United States should privately partner with the UAE to develop and implement a strategy to help Egypt correct its current disastrous trajectory.

Does this mean the United States should ignore human rights abuses in Egypt and give up on democracy promotion? Certainly not, but a new approach is required. For the past decade, democracy-promotion efforts in the broader Middle East have focused on promotion through programs devoted to civil society. In his observations on democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville was fascinated by the richness of American civil society, writing that "in democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others." Political scientists such as Robert Putnam have developed his ideas further by making the case that strong social capital gets translated into political capital. That belief has been central to the democracy-promotion industry.

But Egypt has challenged that assumption. Despite heavy investment in civil society, as the story of the country's struggles during the past few years illustrates, social capital did not transform into political capital. The deficit resulted from the missing first ingredient: human capital. The state of Egyptian education is dismal, ranking among the worst in the world. The Egyptian educational system does not produce the human capital necessary for a modern state to function, nor does it prepare graduates for a modernized economy. The educational system does not encourage free inquiry; Egyptian students learn very little about the world beyond Egypt, world religions, ideas, or history. The Trump administration should partner with Egypt to reform its educational system. Egyptian history textbooks need to introduce world history, the

history of ideas, and world religions and cultures, and students should be made aware of the contributions Christians, Jews, and women have made to Egyptian society. A project to have selected Egyptian schools across the country—not merely in Cairo—adopt an American curriculum should be investigated.

Compounding the problem of the educational system is the deficit of knowledge in the country. As the United Nations "Arab Human Development Report" in 2002 noted: "The Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one fifth of the number that Greece translates. The cumulative total of translated books since the Caliph Maa'moun's time (the ninth century) is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year." People don't read *The Federalist Papers* and suddenly become liberal democrats, but a country of over ninety million where no Arabic translations of the major Western canon exists will not become a liberal democracy any time soon. Those hoping for the emergence of liberal democracy in the Arabic-speaking world must address this deficit. To overcome this deficit, American democracy-promotion programs should be devoted to spreading ideas instead of providing Egyptians with tools. The proverb, "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime," is only half right. Teaching a man how to fish is still merely a tool. Democracy-promotion programs should instead make the argument for fishing.

An unreformed Egypt is destined to be in a state of continued decline. A country divided between those who believe that el-Sisi's mother is Jewish, which makes him an agent of the grand Jewish conspiracy, and those who believe that Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan el-Banna's father was Jewish and, hence, that he was an agent of the grand Jewish conspiracy, is not going to transition to democracy. Nor will it create a healthy political system that is sustainable and capable of withstanding regional upheaval. Strengthening state institutions in Egypt should be the United States' first priority in the country. It is important for these state institutions to be representative, but it is equally important for them to be functioning.

The United States is uniquely positioned to have a positive impact on Egypt's trajectory. Within the United States live over half a million Egyptians, predominantly Copts. Highly successful, the Coptic-American community is better educated and more financially well-off than the US average and lists among its numbers entrepreneurs, university professors, scientists, lawyers, athletes, and actors. President Trump has a firsthand knowledge of the community with the Trump Organization's vice-president himself a Copt. The NSC's Dina Powell has shown the great potential the community

can play in advancing the American-Egyptian alliance. The United States should use its Egyptian-American citizens in engaging Egypt. Egyptian-Americans have unique knowledge of their former country and many of them remain deeply connected to it.

A new page has opened in American-Egyptian relations. As with previous administrations, an opportunity exists—as well as a challenge. Egypt has lured many a country and leader in the past into imagining it to be something it is not, with disastrous consequences. Many years ago, in *The Arab Predicament,* the late Fouad Ajami warned that "ancient civilizations stir the imagination: They have a kind of malleability that enables others to read into them what they want; they could be hotbeds of revolution or fragile entities ready to be courted and redeemed. They invite those with a sense of destiny." It would be a pity if the Trump administration fell into the same trap.

NOTES

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The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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