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Coups d'état or liberation? US-Egypt relations after the fall of Mohamed Morsi

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In response to the political convulsions in Egypt, Barack Obama stated from Dar el Salaam that the United States is committed to the democratic process in that country and urged the Egyptian president, Mohammed Morsi, to work towards the [building of consensus](#). Following Morsi's overthrow by the army on 3 July, the United States urged a speedy return to civilian rule. Obama's reaction to the crisis is typical of the cautiousness and realism that has characterised his [policy towards the Middle East over the past few years](#). Western critics of the US president castigate this as 'lack of strategy'; his supporters, pointing to the disasters spelt by imperialist over-extension under the Bush

administration, applaud it for keeping a balance between foreign policy ends and means.

Neither position cuts much ice in Egypt, as I found out during my visit a few weeks ago. Despite the country's newly-found political activism over the past two and a half years, many of my interlocutors appeared convinced that the United States is still the 'grand master' behind the scenes, determining key decisions and shaping outcomes in the country's political process.

Friends and colleagues who had visited Cairo earlier in the year, had warned me that the security situation was precarious. In my short visit, some of my meetings meant venturing into the downtown areas of the city. I noticed the gangs of young men roaming the streets, particularly after dusk (though I will never quite be sure whether they were, simply, a symptom of post-Mubarak precariousness or simply youth passing their time). The lingering sense of threat in Cairo's streets, which has exploded in the past few days, was already breaking out in sporadic violence: [between supporters and opponents of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood](#), between Muslims and Copts, between fans of various football clubs, and so on...the fissures kept multiplying in a society experiencing accelerated change.

Threat, fear and uncertainty were also reflected in the fragmented narratives on the unfolding political situation. I was struck by how incongruous the interpretations of developments were by the people I spoke with (journalists, academics, civil society activists, taxi drivers, to name a few). In times of great insecurity everyone seems to be reverting to stereotypes whilst 'reading' hidden meanings and intentions – which may or may not necessarily be justified – in events, decisions and pronouncements. Typically, at that stage, many of the more secular-minded Egyptians were fearful of the Brotherhood's grand plan of Islamising the country and read its every decision in this light. Equally, Islamists were paranoid about the 'evident' intention to overthrow them. What is at stake is the future of Egyptian society and politics: who will determine it and by what methods and processes. The greater and more pressing issue is the raw reality of a deteriorating economic situation that has drastically affected peoples' daily lives. The shrinking of foreign policy reserves and the loss of value of the Egyptian lira are taking a heavy toll.

The narratives are particularly fragmented when it comes to the role outsiders play in the drama of Egyptian politics that is currently being played out. One idea that was circulating at the time of my visit – though I had no way of checking its pervasiveness – was that the United States had 'switched sides' and now supported the Muslim Brotherhood. It was even said that the Americans had been 'grooming' the Muslim Brotherhood, or at least courting it even before Mubarak fell. The Faustian deal between Washington and the Brotherhood, an academic colleague told me in all seriousness, was that, in exchange for US support, the new Egyptian regime under the Brotherhood would not attack Israel. The proof lied in Morsi's mediation between [Hamas and the Israeli government in November 2012](#) and the fact that, since then, the Gaza-Israel border has been 'quiet'.

It is in the very nature of conspiracy theories that they are un-falsifiable: no possible evidence can be brought to dispel them either because the evidence's veracity will be disputed (it did not really happen) or because more 'proof' in support of the theory will be brought in (however unconvincing and irrelevant it may be) in a constant game of shifting goalposts. Had I been able to point out, for example, that before 2011 the United States was criticised for supporting the Mubarak regime and not engaging enough with the Brotherhood, I would have been told that it was actually happening, behind the scenes. Had I said that, in April and then June 2013, fire was exchanged across the Israel-Gaza border once again, my colleague would have probably attributed it to crossed-wires or some other pretext. Had I been able to suggest, following the military coup of 3 July

2013, that at the very least the Americans appear to be backtracking from supporting the Brotherhood, I would be told that some unspecified practical obstacles have appeared and the Americans are biding their time.

The view that Washington has the ability to 'make or break' governments in Egypt and the power to shape events and outcomes according to its interests has a long pedigree in the country. At the present moment, this belief is fed by the on-going negotiations between Egypt and the IMF, purportedly controlled by the United States. The idea that outsiders control the fate of Egypt constitutes a constant trait of Egyptian political history. It has presumably been weakened by the uprising of 2011, and what has happened since then, not least the protests which contributed to Morsi's overthrow. However, it is still a powerful element in the country's political culture which is pernicious because it causes an abdication of responsibility.

Although always an important player, the United States has never been able to dominate Egypt or the Middle East region as a whole. Even at the height of the Cold War and in the 'unipolar' decade of the 1990s, its ability to control situations and shape them to suit its objectives was partial. At this particular juncture in the history of US-Egyptian relations, raising the spectre of US omnipotence is ironic. The Obama administration has shifted attention from the Middle East to Asia and is disengaging from active involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan; [it played a role in Libya only reluctantly](#) and has made it clear, the decision of arming the rebels notwithstanding, that [it does not plan to get involved directly in the Syria imbroglio](#). As an American colleague pointed out, the belief in US omnipotence sits uneasily with the major preoccupation of those working on the Middle East in the State Department: how to retain a degree of relevance and influence in the region given the limited and limiting conditions which constrain American policy.

[US policy towards Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood needs to be continuously discussed and debated at a serious level](#). It is fair, as commentators and civil society activists in Egypt have done, to take Washington to task for [not having been critical enough of the Brotherhood's human rights record](#). This, of course, was also the criticism of US foreign policy during the Mubarak years... Plus ça change?

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