

Assessing the Role of the Muslim Brotherhood: The Arab Winter may leave America “Out in the Cold”

By [Stop NATO](#)

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By Clifford Kiracofe

Egypt, while increasing its regional role, is following a policy in line with Washington’s requirements: peace with Israel and regime change in Syria.

Washington calculates that it can manage its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and therefore its branches in Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. During the Cold War, the West behind the scenes worked closely with the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia to blunt Soviet influence in the region. Washington today believes it can play a similar game to obtain regional objectives.. This policy goes back to the George W. Bush administration and to former vice president Dick Cheney’s regional strategy to align Israel with the Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia to oppose Iran, a Shi’a state and Hezbollah, a Shi’a resistance movement in Lebanon.

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi’s attempt to grab power raises many questions not only about Egypt’s future but also about the Middle East and US foreign policy, despite Morsi having scrapped the decree under the pressure of massive protests.

As the Arab Spring turns into an Arab Winter, what are its contradictions and consequences?

Two years ago, as Egypt entered a phase of powerful public demands for more democratic conditions, skeptics warned against the Muslim Brotherhood. They said that this semi-clandestine organization had no interest in democracy but only in gaining power in order to erect an Islamic “caliphate.”

In the past, Egypt had capable leaders seeking modernization such as Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) and khedive Ismail Pasha (1830-95). Foreign intrigue and imperialism, however, interrupted Egypt’s progress in the 19th century. Pasha, a friend of the US, was deposed in 1879 by the British Empire which then undertook to control Egypt.

The Egyptian military liberated the country from foreign domination in the revolution of 1952. Soon after, the great Arab nationalist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, emerged as president.

The US position was mixed. At first, it sought to work with Nasser. Former US president Dwight D. Eisenhower staunchly defended Egypt against Israel, the UK, and France during the Suez Crisis of 1956. But then the Cold War and Zionism placed Washington and Cairo at

odds.

After Anwar Sadat (1918-81) became Egyptian president in 1970 and later became friendly, Washington moved to work with Egypt as a way to reduce Soviet influence in the Middle East and to protect Israel.

Sadat's pro-Western move and 1979 peace treaty with Israel, however, angered the Arab and Muslim world. Consequently, Egypt lost prestige and influence regionally. Notwithstanding this loss, Hosni Mubarak continued the foreign policy line established by Sadat.

Today, Egypt under President Morsi, has significant contradictions in internal and external policy. Internally, the Arab Spring should have brought more democratic conditions, but it has not.

What has happened to Cairo's foreign policy? Egypt, while increasing its regional role, is following a policy in line with Washington's requirements: peace with Israel and regime change in Syria.

Morsi's policy to uphold the peace treaty with Israel and other understandings supports Washington's policy. Washington's Egypt policy is, in fact, subsidiary to Washington's defense of Israel and Zionism. As long as Egypt supports this policy, such as under Sadat, Mubarak and now Morsi, US-Egyptian relations will remain on track despite a lack of progress on internal democratization.

Washington calculates that it can manage its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and therefore its branches in Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. During the Cold War, the West behind the scenes worked closely with the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia to blunt Soviet influence in the region. Washington today believes it can play a similar game to obtain regional objectives.

In the present regional game, Washington sides with the Muslim Brotherhood which has support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This policy goes back to the George W. Bush administration and to former vice president Dick Cheney's regional strategy to align Israel with the Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia to oppose Iran, a Shi'a state and Hezbollah, a Shi'a resistance movement in Lebanon.

Washington is working with Riyadh, Doha, and Cairo to ensure regime change in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood Syria branch has had a long-term strategy to take power and to change secular Syria into an Islamist "sharia state." The US supports this because it calculates that this is the best way to protect Israel, by eliminating a regime allied to Iran and by neutralizing Hizbullah.

The Palestinian resistance movement Hamas altered its policy in line with Washington's regional objectives. Hamas has now linked to Qatar although this has produced sharp differences within the movement. Egypt's role in the cease-fire was facilitated by Cairo's linkages to Qatar and Saudi Arabia and Hamas' policy change to a new patron in Doha.

While the US may think that its regional strategy, diplomacy, and covert action will result in success, this remains to be seen. For the broad mass of the population in the region, the US is perceived negatively. For not a few analysts, Washington's policy is not only reckless and destabilizing but has led to the Arab Winter.

The author is an educator and former senior professional staff member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

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