

**MANEUVERING THE ISLAMIST-SECULARIST  
DIVIDE IN THE ARAB WORLD:  
HOW THE UNITED STATES CAN PRESERVE  
ITS INTERESTS AND VALUES IN AN  
INCREASINGLY POLARIZED ENVIRONMENT**

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This monograph examines the growing divide in the Arab world between Islamists and secularists, with a particular concentration on Egypt and Tunisia, the first two countries that experienced the so-called Arab Spring. The transition away from the authoritarian regimes of Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Egypt and Tunisia, respectively, has been rocky, to say the least. With the legalization of Islamist parties, and their success at the polls, conventional wisdom in the United States was that the Islamist parties were the wave of the future and that U.S. policy should be adjusted accordingly to take account of this unleashed force, which long had been repressed but had garnered the allegiance of what appeared to be a majority of the population. What was not foreseen was the backlash by the secular-liberal forces in these societies against Islamist rule. Because secular parties did poorly in elections, they were dismissed by both the Islamists and some U.S. policymakers as insignificant political players. But what was underestimated was the secularists' ability to mobilize equally large sections of society and count on existing and fairly powerful institutions (the military and the judiciary in the case of Egypt, and the trade unions in the case of Tunisia) to come to their aid against their countries' main Islamist parties.

In Egypt, there was a widespread belief among secular elements that the United States had made a secret pact of sorts with the Muslim Brotherhood. The United States had come to the aid of Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate, Mohammad Morsi, against a reticent military establishment that had favored his opponent, and then went on to praise Morsi for helping to broker a truce between Israel and Hamas a few

months later. When Morsi, the very next day, issued a presidential decree exempting his decisions from judicial review – in other words, placing himself above the law – the official U.S. reaction was muted. When Morsi pushed through a new constitution that was drafted primarily by his Muslim Brotherhood allies, this action and his earlier decree created a huge political firestorm in Egypt. U.S. officials were reluctant to lessen their support for Morsi in part because he was the elected president of Egypt (in an election that was deemed fairly free and fair) and because Morsi was helpful on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. But for secular-liberals, Morsi was acting as an authoritarian leader who wanted to impose the Brotherhood's social agenda on society to make Egypt a religiously and socially intolerant state.

By the time the United States started to criticize Morsi (albeit tepidly) in the spring of 2013, it had lost the support of nearly the entire Egyptian liberal establishment. Secular forces then mounted a massive petition drive against Morsi to force him to call early presidential elections, coupled with mass protests in late-June 2013, an action that was indirectly criticized by the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt. The Egyptian military, under the leadership of General Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, then decided to side with the anti-Morsi camp and ousted him in early-July 2013. Soon after, the military and security forces mounted a massive security crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian society became highly polarized between the Islamists and the secularists, and both sides of this divide blamed the United States: the secular camp sharply criticized the United States for supposedly aiding and abetting Morsi when he was president, while the Broth-

erhood condemned the United States for supposedly giving the Egyptian military the “green light” for the crackdown.

In Tunisia, secularists became enraged when two prominent secular leaders were assassinated over the course of several months, believing that the ruling Islamist En-Nahda party was not doing enough to stop the activities of the more radical Islamist groups who were responsible for these deaths. Mounting secular pressure, and seeing the fate of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood nearby, compelled En-Nahda to relinquish power and agree to hold new elections later in 2014. Because the United States was not involved in Tunisia to the same degree that it was in Egypt, there was not the same backlash against the United States as had occurred in Egypt.

Nonetheless, it appears that U.S. policymakers were caught flat-footed by the secular backlash to Islamist rule, post-Arab Spring, and were floundering as they tried to come up with a proper policy that would somehow preserve American interests in such countries. This monograph demonstrates that having Islamists in power or in a dominant position in Arab transition countries is a lightning rod for secularists and leads to instability. Hence, it recommends that the United States pursue a policy that would enhance the prospects of secular-liberal parties in the beginning of a transitory process from authoritarianism to democracy by favoring the establishment of a broad coalition government and a delay of elections for 3 years. With the authoritarian lid removed, Islamists have tended to have an advantage over secular parties because Islamists had a long track record in serving poorer segments of society and could tap into the religious sentiments of the population. Thus, it would make better sense to put off elections, allowing time for secular parties to develop their political platforms and engage with the public and give them governing experience by participating in a coalition government. After a few years, the secularists would then be in a position in which they could compete against the Islamist parties.

Such a policy was favored before, albeit on a different continent and in a different era. Toward the end of World War II, the anti-Nazi and anti-fascist parties of Italy and France formed a coalition government with the support of both the United States and the Soviet Union. Because of their prominent role in the resistance, the Communist parties of Italy and France were probably the most popular single parties in these countries, at least initially; they were members of the coalition governments along with the non-Communists. The United States, working with the non-Communists, encouraged the delay of national

elections as long as possible to give the non-Communists the opportunity to develop their parties and get their message across. This strategy worked. While the Communists remained strong parties with considerable followings, they were not able to dominate the political landscape. The lesson of this experience was that moderate parties need time to develop, and such policies can be applied to the Arab world, perhaps with more finesse and subtlety.

The question remains how the United States should respond when the Arab transitional state has already gone through intense polarization (and zero-sum politics), as we have witnessed in Egypt since late-2012. Both Morsi and his military-secular opponents have practiced exclusionary politics along Islamist-secularist dividing lines. This is admittedly a more difficult situation, but the monograph argues that the United States should be consistent on human rights regardless of which side of the divide is in power. It should also press the authorities to accept inclusionary politics as much as possible, and should offer additional U.S. assistance if, after a crackdown, the winning side eases up on the repression and is genuinely committed to pursuing political openness.

The monograph also argues that U.S. Army officers, in conversations with their military counterparts in such countries, should encourage these officers to stick to their traditional role of defending the nation and not be drawn into an internal security role that is geared not against genuine terrorists but the regime’s political opponents.

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