

## **External Actors and Post –January 25 Egypt**

**Nibal Attia**

*(Political Science department, Misr University for Science and technology, Egypt)*

---

**Abstract:** *The unpredictability of the Arab uprisings in general and the Egyptian one in particular lies at a much deeper level about the nature of Egypt's international relations both regionally and globally. This paper attempts to decipher the driving force of foreign policy formulations of the Western world, represented by the US and the EU, and the Gulf monarchies' reaction to the geostrategic transformations that could possibly culminate from regime changes in Egypt over the period 2011-2013.*

---

### **I. Introduction**

The 'Arab Spring', as it came to be called in the West, that transpired in 2011 has astonishingly transformed the mindset of the Western world in that no one in the US or the EU, let alone the Gulf region could have predicted that the Arab peoples, perceived previously as 'so singularly resistant to democratization' would take to the streets resolutely demanding the overthrow of deeply rooted autocracies (Dincer & Kutlay, 2013; 419; Parchami, 2012; 35). However, the unpredictability of the Arab uprisings in general and the Egyptian one in particular lies at a much deeper level about the nature of Egypt's international relations both regionally and globally. This paper attempts to decipher the driving force of foreign policy formulations of the Western world, represented by the US and the EU, and the Gulf monarchies' reaction to the geostrategic transformations that could possibly culminate from regime changes in Egypt over the period 2011-2013. In its analysis, this paper depends on neorealist as well as neoliberal institutionalist assumptions, arguing that in order to understand the nature of Egypt's international relations it is better to analyze that in neorealist terms, i.e. the foreign policy formulations of external actors (in this case the West and the Gulf states) are largely shaped by their vested geostrategic interests that are defined in power politics terms, emphasizing the dimension of relative gains over that of absolute gains.

### **II. The Theoretical Underpinnings: Neorealism Vs. Liberal Institutionalism**

In order to understand the nature of Egypt's international relations, we need first to unpack the various claims that are embedded in neorealism as well as neoliberal institutionalism. Neorealism has its basis in the realist tradition as laid down by Hans Morgenthau, the premise of which is 'state interest defined in terms of power' (Diehl, 2005; 63-4; Waltz, n.d.). Neorealism has distanced itself from classical realism in that it focuses not merely on the character of interacting units (perceived by realism as egoistic and selfish) but rather on the structure of the international system, conceived of as anarchic in nature. So it is the pressures imposed by the system structure, and not simply human nature, that compel political actors to formulate their policies towards the other actors in the system in a self-interested way (Waltz, 2000). This depends on the situation in which political actors find themselves, and how that, in Waltz's (1979) words, 'constrains them from some actions, disposes them towards other, and affects the outcomes of their actions' (p. 65). According to neorealism, the world is in a state of competition due to its state of anarchy, and this per se drives states to seek power in order to either achieve security or to become a hegemon in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001; 21). Neoliberal institutionalism, in contrast, does not acknowledge the perpetuation of conflict in the world system, which it paints in a more positive light than neorealism. Neoliberalism sees value in sustained international cooperation and integration. It emphasizes the role of non-state actors, as an independent variable capable of effecting change regardless of how that would impact the concerned states in the system. Unlike the state-centric analysis of world politics as one of conflict that is inherent in realist thought, neoliberal institutionalism accentuates the role played by international organizations in advancing mutually beneficial cooperation, and thus state force becomes an 'ineffective instrument of policy' (Keohane & Nye, 1977; 24). Neoliberalists, thus, prioritize low politics' (socio-economic issues) over 'high politics' (security issues), while accepting the basic tenets of neorealism, i.e. that the world system is anarchic, and that the state is the most important actor. They distinguish themselves, however, by asserting the importance of non-state actors in shaping state policies, viewing cooperation between states as not only possible but desirable (Keohane, 2012). In what follows the paper attempts to derive insights from both theories in analyzing the nature of Egypt's relations vis-a-vis other actors in the system, emphasizing the security dimension as well as the desire for hegemony that drive these relationships.

### **The West vis-à-vis Egypt**

Western relationship, its varying degrees and contradictions aside, with the region in general and Egypt in particular can be viewed as one of self-interest. Self-interest in this regard could be translated into maintaining peace and security in the region, i.e. the prevention of fundamentalist, radical forces from assuming power, on the one hand, and the security of Israel on the other. Stepping back a little in light of Western self-interest, it becomes clear why the survival of the Mubarak regime was aided by the tacit support of Western governments. Both the US and the EU had been cautious in advocating and advancing political reform in Egypt lest it destabilize the country, and hence the balance of power in the entire Middle East. This was amply clear in the US response to the 2007 constitutional amendments, which dangerously infringed on human rights protections and warded off any possibility for peaceful political participation by the opposition. This lukewarm reaction was also clear in the ENP (European Neighborhood Policy) Action Plan which was negotiated solely with a select group of senior policy makers who in turn made sure that reforms would never touch the corridors of Mubarak's regime (Dunne, M. & Brown, N., 2007; Dincer, O. & Kutlay, M., 2013; 423-4). This is the overriding underpinning that would guide Western foreign policy formulation in the era following Mubarak: slow, calculated change that would preserve the structure of the region for the purpose of serving the West's geostrategic interests. From the above one can conclude that democracy promotion in itself could have never been the primary aim on the Western agenda regarding the post-9/11 Middle East.

According to Bouchet (2011), the whole notion of democratization was abandoned by the time President Obama took office; although some analysts would go so far as to claim that 'the US has never made democracy promotion the overriding goal of its foreign policy' (Fukuyama & McFaul, 2007-8; 29). This was reinforced in the three pillars of US foreign policy as crystallized by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: the three D's of defense, diplomacy and development (p. 573). In this regard, Egypt would be in a favorably stabilized position if she modeled her newly gained democracy on Turkey, as an alternative to the radical Islamists who have been vilified since the September 11 attacks (Erdem, 2012; 435). The 'democratization' process, although many analysts have reservations regarding the term, was viewed by the US to be best shepherded by the military establishment.

During the revolution of 2011, after some hesitation, the US finally accepted the futility of Mubarak's position, believing that the SCAF would be the only reliable institution with regard to maintaining US-Egyptian strategic interests (Aftandilian, 2013; 6-7). The autocratic nature of the SCAF, which was favorable to the West, was manifest in the institution's management of political transformation 'by means of unilateral communiqués' (ZguriO, 2012; 420). In the US conception, there is no realistic alternative to autocracies in the region, especially in places where its strategic and security interests are at stake; authoritarian allies, thus, become the lesser of two evils (Fukuyama & McFaul, 2007-8; 31; Huntington, 2002; 198).

With the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012-13 as the *de jure* and *de facto* authority, it was not the question of whether political Islam coexisted with democracy, pluralism or women's rights that haunted US officials. What the US really feared were the kinds of foreign policies such Islamist groups might pursue. Unlike Mubarak's autocratic yet pro-Western rule, Islamists were first perceived as having a distinctive conception of the Arab world that is confident, independent and willing to project influence beyond Egypt's borders. This was the reason why the US was hesitant to champion genuine socio-political reform in Egypt throughout Mubarak's years and even following the 2011 uprising. It was the inherent element of unpredictability in democracy promotion; democracy might bring governments that are less amenable to US security interests in the region (Hamid, 2011; 40). Thus, when the Muslim Brothers proved benignly harmless in terms of US security interests by promising to keep peace treaties with Israel, and refraining from backing terrorist activities, the US decided to build ties with the Muslim Brothers and turned a blind eye to Mursi's exclusivist policies at home (Makara, 2013).

Much of the support of external actors to the Muslim Brotherhood is defined by their strategic interests in the region. So despite the deepening of authoritarianism during Mursi's rule, the EU increased its funds to Egypt, while reduced the funds allocated to the promotion and protection of human rights. Driven by the precarious security balance in the region, the EU and the US wanted to make sure that Egypt would commit to existing peace treaties with Israel, that it would align with Western position on Iran and Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood promised them that and they were okay with it regardless of the exclusive nature of the Mursi regime. The West turned against the Muslim Brothers only when the presence of their authority posed a threat to the Gulf monarchies, with whom they have a special relationship because of the oil and the alienation of Iran (Huber, 2013; 98-112).

### **The Gulf Monarchies vis-à-vis Egypt**

The conservative Gulf monarchies are worried over the possibility of domestic revolution marching at their doors, and so they seek to 'derevolutionise' the Egyptian crisis. This meant taming the Islamists' power, forging a good relationship with the Egyptian military, maintaining the relationship between Egypt and the US and thus the preservation of Israeli status quo. We should perceive the relationship between the Gulf monarchies, with the exception of Qatar, and the Egyptian military as one of symbiosis and absolute gains. The Gulf States are important lenders to Egypt, and this assists the military in stabilizing the economy, thus thwarting million-man marches against its caretaker government following the overthrow of Mursi in 2013. The question becomes: why did the military not look to Iran for economic aid? This is because the Gulf states are far richer than Iran; Saudi Arabia's oil and gas bounty amounted to 311 billion dollars in 2011, over three times Iran's energy bounty. Moreover, Saudi per capita net revenues from oil and gas is nearly seven times that of Iran and therefore has more wealth to dispense than Iran in foreign aid (Frisch, 2013; 180-204).

Now why Qatar was the exception in this equation and why did it support the Mursi government? The answer lies in the fact that Qatar, unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, does not have the kinds of economic pressures due to its small demographic size and high per capita income. Moreover, with a strategic ally like Egypt under Mursi, Qatar would have increased its leverage remarkably in the region, thus challenging the Saudi leadership within the GCC (McQueen, 2009; 165-178).

When it comes to Iran, and regardless of the calls for democracy and secularism, it views the revolution in Egypt as the first step to the full-fledged establishment of an Islamist order in the region, an order favoring Iran and its allies, unlike the Western world which viewed the uprisings as calls for greater freedom and human rights (Parchami, 2012; 36). Some analysts argue that chaos, instability and the unpredictability of the revolution represent the ideal condition for Iran, as this poses a threat to Iran's most rivalrous enemies, the US and Israel, thus maximizing Iran's benefits in the region (ibid, 37).

### **III. Conclusion**

From the above this paper concludes that the Arab Spring has brought both expectations and menaces to those international actors with vested interests in the future of the Middle East. It has proved that the Western world's primary concern is the preservation of its security interests as well as the hegemonic structure with the Gulf monarchies, the ultimate ally of the US at the top of that structure. This paints the neoliberalist assumption about cooperation that is based on mutual benefits in a negative light since the very idea of democracy is never paid sufficient consideration in the foreign policy formulation of the world superpowers no matter how it will benefit countries like Egypt in its march towards development. This proves the neorealist claims about the anarchic state of the world system, cooperation that is premised on the maximization of world superpowers benefits at the detriment of Third World's populations and finally the conflictual relationship in the Gulf region that has proven the futility of any attempt to change the Western-sponsored structure.

### **References**

- [1]. Dincer, O. & Kutlay, M. (2013). The Arab Spring: A Game Changer in Turkey-EU Relations? *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 14, 418-430.
- [2]. Parchami, A. (2012). The 'Arab Spring': The View from Tehran. *Contemporary Politics*, 18, 35-52.
- [3]. Diehl, P. (Ed.). (2005). *The Politics of Global Governance: International Organizations in an Interdependent World*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- [4]. Waltz, K. (2000). Structural Realism after the Cold War. *International Security*, 25, 5-41.
- [5]. Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory on International Politics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [6]. Mearsheimer, J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- [7]. Keohane, R. & Nye, J. (1977). *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- [8]. Keohane, R. (2012). Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism. *International Relations*, 26, 125-138.
- [9]. Dunne, M. & Brown, N. (2007). *Egypt's Controversial Constitutional Amendments*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- [10]. Bochet, N. (2011). Barack Obama's Democracy Promotion at Midterm. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 15, 572-588.
- [11]. Fukuyama, F. & McFaul, M. (2007-8). Should Democracy be Promoted or Demoted? *The Washington Quarterly*, 31, 23-45.
- [12]. Erdem, B. (2012). Adjustment of the secular Islamist role model (Turkey) to the 'Arab Spring': the relationship between the Arab uprisings and Turkey in the Turkish and world press. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23, 435-452.
- [13]. Aftandilian, G. (2013). *Egypt's New Regime and the Future of the US-Egyptian Strategic Relationships*. Strategic Studies Institute, 162.
- [14]. Zguric, B. (2012). Challenges for Democracy in Countries Affected by the 'Arab Spring'. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23, 417-434.
- [15]. Huntington, S. (2002). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of World Order*. London: The Free Press.
- [16]. Hamid, S. (2011). *The Rise of the Islamists How Islamists Will Change Politics, and Vice Versa*. *Foreign Affairs*, 90, 40-57.

- [17]. Makara, M. (2013). Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring. *Democracy and Security*, 9, 334-359.
- [18]. Huber, D. (2013). US and EU Human Rights and Democracy Pormotion since the Arab Spring. *Rethinking its Content, Targets and Instruments. The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 48, 98-112.
- [19]. Frisch, H. (2013). The Egyptian Army and Egypt's 'Spring'. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36, 180-204.
- [20]. McQueen, B. (2009). Democracy Promotion and Arab Autocracies. *Peace, Security and Global Change*, 21, 165-178.