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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, RI

EGYPT'S POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND
CHALLENGES FACING U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

by

Mary S. Blankenship
Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, the increasing influence of Islamic fundamentalism on regional politics has caught U.S. attention and caused U.S. policy makers concern over our political relationships and ability to influence potential allies. The Islamic takeover in Iran and the military coup in Algeria drew international attention to the reality of the Islamic threat. The overall trend of Islamic resurgence in nations with weakened economies has U.S. policy makers concerned over the possibility of "another Iran." Nowhere does this pose a more serious threat than Egypt.

Recent events and trends in Egypt have resulted in an increasing perception of Egypt as a potentially unstable government. The future implications of this pose significant challenges for U.S. policy makers at the strategic level and for U.S. Central Command at the operational level. Although there are still no predictions that Egypt will fall to an Islamic regime in the near future, the increased tensions are cause for reevaluating the effectiveness of our political and military strategies in dealing with Egypt.

BACKGROUND

Egypt--a key link to the Middle East. Egypt has been a key link to Middle East politics and military operations during crisis for many years. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. has built close ties with Egypt as a political stepping stone to

the rest of the Arab world, as well as to ensure the availability and security of the Suez Canal, and as an effort to keep peace with Israel. Continued U.S. presence in further developing relations with Egypt will continue to be critical during increased political turbulence both internal to Egypt and within the entire Middle East region.

Importance of stable democratic societies. Although U.S. foreign policy has always been concerned about the stability of nations around the globe, the emphasis on stable societies has increased since the end of the Cold War. In every region of the world, the U.S. is concerned about building stable societies as a foundation for achieving regional goals. For example, in Central and South America, combating the regional drug problem can hardly be achieved if the governments of key nations are unstable or corrupt. In the Middle East, the stability of every nation is important to regional stability and balance of power. Egypt's relationship with Israel, their strong cultural and political influence in the region, and their geostrategic position on the Mediterranean and Red Seas make them critical to regional stability.

U.S. foreign policy continues to focus on support for democratic civilian governments. In the National Security Strategy, President George Bush stated that "we must continue to support the concept of democratic civilian authority over national military institutions. Without civilian control,

democracy cannot exist."¹ Even though there are many forms of democratic government, U.S. foreign policy will continue to focus on the ability of a national population to choose their form of government rather than be governed by dictators or "elected" through military coups.

Is Egypt a stable, democratic society? Although the political parties are limited and the control of political leadership over any potential threat is substantial, Egypt is still considered to be a democratic secular society. Part of its stability can be attributed to authoritarianism rather than real democratic rule. The political system allows for multiple parties within a constitutional framework and frequent criticism can be seen among the free press and the population. But the long history of autocratic rule still has its grip when it comes time to vote. It is no surprise that President Mubarak won the recent re-election by 96% vote² even though it is highly unlikely that he actually has 96% of the public support. It is more likely that authoritarianism rather than a true, open democratic process is what holds the political stability of Egypt intact.

Although the current government is relatively stable, Egypt's rising Islamic influence and increasing economic problems cast doubt on their being forecast as a "stable society" in the future if the trends continue.

POLITICAL SITUATION IN EGYPT

Trends in Egypt. Egypt has a a long history of Islamic tradition which will continue to have an impact on the direction their society takes both socially and politically. Although the trend was toward secularism and Western influence during the past 30-40 years, that trend has clearly shifted toward a renewed interest in Islamic ideals and a rejection of Western influence. Neither of these forces can or should be rejected completely. No society can withstand the force of a complete shift toward "one right system" of beliefs or ideals. The struggle for stability in societies is often a delicate balance between the various cultural, social, and political forces (both external and internal) that make up its population. Egypt is no exception.

Unfortunately, Egypt also has a history of economic struggle. Although Western influence was forced on Egypt due to colonialism and events following World War II, part of the lure of Western influence was due to a desire by the people to improve their economic conditions. Western societies were noticeably more advanced in science and technology--areas that were lacking in the Middle East. Egypt has come a long way toward improved conditions, but not far enough, and have lost ground in the last fifteen years:

". . . the 1980s could be described as a lost decade for Egypt. Not only did the rate of economic growth drop from 7.4 percent to 5 percent annually, but the decade also ended with the significant fall of Egypt from the World Bank's group of lower middle income countries to its group of lower income countries."³

Many analysts believe that the trend toward Islamic resurgence is due to growing discontent among the populations in the Middle East and Egypt in what is viewed as a failure of Western ideology to improve their economic conditions.

Is Islam really a threat to Egypt? In the viewpoint of Western diplomats, it would be difficult to view a potential takeover by an Islamic Fundamentalist regime as not a threat. Besides the U.S. still painfully remembering the loss of relations with Iran after the Islamic takeover, Western policy makers still have difficulty in recognizing that Islamic resurgence and influence in the Middle East is part of their cultural heritage and not necessarily a threat. John Esposito emphasized this point:

"For those who subscribe to a liberal secular or liberal Judaeo-Christian tradition, any intrusion of religion in politics is often viewed as potentially dangerous and "fundamentalist." This perception is intensified when our knowledge of religious groups is limited to those who represent a radical minority."⁴

Much publicity has been given in U.S. newspapers to the Islamic fundamentalist threat in Egypt. But we should neither underestimate the possibility of an Islamic takeover, nor should we exaggerate the problem by assuming that the likely result of the current events would actually be a takeover by force to an exclusively Islamic regime such as what occurred in Iran. The effects of four decades of Western influence on the Arab World and particularly in Egypt will not be easily pushed aside. In his popular article, "The Roots of Muslim

Rage", Bernard Lewis discusses the effects of Western influence:

"We should not exaggerate the dimensions of the problem. The Muslim world is far from unanimous in its rejection of the West, nor have the Muslim regions of the third World been the most passionate and the most extreme in their hostility. . . there is still an imposing Western presence--cultural, economic, diplomatic--in Muslim lands, some of which are Western allies."⁵

Even without exaggeration, it is difficult to ignore the current trend of Islamic influence in Egypt. During the past two years, Islamic militants known as the Gamaa al-Islamiya have terrorized tourists and attacked government officials, catching news headlines every four to six months. They have issued warnings to the outside world that tourists, diplomats, and foreign businessmen are not safe travelling to Egypt; the most recent in late January. This has resulted in a dramatic reduction in Egypt's tourism, crippling an already weak economy. The challenge for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is to tackle both the terrorist attacks and the socio-economic problems simultaneously, because these forces are interrelated. "The success of Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt has been due in part to their ability to channel public discontent with the economy into support for an Islamic regime."⁶

The problem of directly attacking the Islamic group is difficult because they are organized in several small groups throughout the country and they have spread their influence into small religious sectors rather than one centralized

operating point. The Islamic influence is evidenced by renewed public interest in Islamic traditions such as increased attendance at the mosques and a larger population of women wearing the veil rather than western style clothing, which was popular during the last two decades. The trends in Egypt demonstrate that the fundamentalists have gained ground, although it is not likely that they have the means to takeover anytime soon. However, if economic conditions do not show signs of improvement, the public affairs campaign of the Gamaa will have an increasing influence on the public attitude and their support for an alternate solution.

"Egypt's domestic problems create an environment conducive to the growth of radical and anti-democratic opposition groups which are attempting to discredit the government both domestically and internationally."⁷

President Mubarak's leadership. As in any country or group, people look to blame the leadership for failure when things aren't going well. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is no exception. He is frequently blamed in the press and in publications for both the economic problems and the threat of Islamic militants. His failure to implement successful economic growth plans during the last decade fueled the growing discontent among the population which, in turn, has fed the ability of the Islamic groups to spread the message that "Islam is the solution." The Islamic terrorist attacks have targeted specific government officials and the tourism industry, further weakening the economy and attempting to

threaten current leadership. So far, President Mubarak's primary tool against the Islamic group has been severe punishment (execution) of anyone associated with the terrorist attacks. These actions appear harsh and authoritarian; and critics question whether the intended results will be effective in reducing further terrorist acts in the future.

The military coup in Algeria has caused both the international community and Mubarak's internal advisors to suggest that allowing more freedom for the Islamic group to participate openly in the political process would be more effective than using authoritarian "crack-down" tactics. His counterargument is that opening up the political parties to include the fundamentalists, at least under current conditions, would only spur the opposition to more power. He has chosen to follow a more cautious approach politically, trying to reduce the impact of their claim that they alone are concerned about respect for Islamic values and therefore have the only solution to the country's woes.⁸ He has publicly asked them for more specific recommendations to improve the economy and has indicated that until they can do so, he will view them as part of the problem instead of part of an eventual solution.

President Mubarak's actions toward the fundamentalists demonstrates his mixed leadership style, including elements of authoritarianism and moderacy. The authoritarian side stems from his personality, strong military background and the long

history of authoritarian style government in Egypt's history. The moderacy comes from his tendency to "balance" or compromise in his decision-making:

"To some he is a skillful manager, methodically channeling the major streams of political thought and action so they flow together in reasonable tranquility. . He is by nature a balancer, who seeks to find fulcrums between the many polar extremes toward which Egyptian foreign and domestic policies could slide."⁹

His ability to balance in the daily events of political life, however, may not be successful in the long run. He still appears to be losing ground and will need a change in policies, with or without a change in style, to achieve success for Egypt in the future. If he is unable to improve economic and social conditions, regardless of how he incorporates Islamicists into his plan, the militants will eventually be able to overcome him:

"The extent to which governments in predominantly Muslim countries fail to meet the socioeconomic needs of their societies, restrict political participation, prove insensitive to the need to effectively incorporate Islam as a component in their national identity and ideology, or appear exceedingly dependent on the West, will contribute to the appeal of an Islamic political alternative."¹⁰

Implications for the future. Most analysts believe it is unlikely that Egypt will fall prey to an Islamic takeover at all, or any time soon. However, we should not underestimate the possible residual effect across the Middle East should

such an event occur:

"Egypt in the hands of an aggressive, Islamic regime-- still a remote possibility--could prove far more destabilizing for the Middle East than Iran. Such a regime would almost certainly threaten peace with Israel. And it would likely have much more influence in the Arab countries than the Iranians, who are partially isolated from their Arab neighbors by language and cultural barriers."¹¹

Even if an Islamic takeover is not likely in the near future, there is no doubt that the long struggle to improve economic conditions will also not happen soon. The road ahead will be a continued struggle not just for President Mubarak and his staff, but for the entire population and international community involved in supporting them. "The only prospect that one can envisage for Egypt's embryonic civil society is one of a protracted crisis."¹²

CHALLENGES FOR U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

U.S. strategic policy toward Egypt. The United States views Egypt as a "moderating friend"--an influential actor on the stage of Middle East affairs, able to moderate interactions between the various Arab states.¹³ Although we have separate relationships with other Arab countries, our relationship with Egypt gives added weight to other more tenuous relationships.

U.S. support for Egypt has been primarily financial support "earmarked" for economic aid and security assistance. Historically, it has been part of a goal to keep peace between Egypt and Israel, with these two countries receiving half of

all U.S. foreign aid. Unfortunately, the financial assistance does not appear to be making any difference in Egypt's economy or political situation:

" . . . it is disturbing that after an enormous, nearly 20-year American effort so little about the Egyptian economy and political system has changed. There seems to have been too much funding and not enough tough questioning."¹⁴

Ensuring U.S. funds are used for specific economic improvement programs and for security assistance remains a key issue in continued decisions about U.S. foreign aid to Egypt. But the U.S. is cautious for a reason. There is a delicate balance to be maintained between supporting a country and interfering in their internal affairs. With regard to the Islamic influence "we can do little or nothing. Even the attempt might do harm, for these are issues that Muslims must decide among themselves."¹⁵

Although financial aid appears to be our only physical means of supporting Egypt, diplomatic efforts through a wide range of political, economic, and military meetings also continue to lay the foundation for a solid relationship with Egypt well into the future.

Keeping Egypt as an Ally: In addition to being a key link to the Middle East politically, Egypt is also in a geographically strategic position. Egypt is the only country which has ports on both the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, as well as controlling access to the Suez Canal. In DESERT STORM we:

" . . . moved 95 percent of our lift requirements by sea . . . Had the use of these sea lines of communication been denied, our only alternative would have been to move supplies and equipment around the Cape of Good Hope with a 40 percent increase in transit times and a commensurate increase in cost."¹⁶

Our ability to keep these sea lines of communication open through access to the Suez Canal will remain a vital interest to the U.S. and the international community. Keeping Egypt as an ally in the future will reduce the risks of conflict over use of the canal.

Building and maintaining Egypt as an ally must be accomplished at both the strategic and operational levels even in peacetime. It is easy to mistake the study of the operational level of warfare as a strictly wartime endeavor. But in order to prepare for achieving operational goals in a crisis, groundwork must be laid well in advance. Whether we are involved with Egypt as an ally in a coalition for war against an external enemy, or whether we find ourselves involved in countering an internal insurgency or uprising, our political and military interactions with the Egyptians must prepare us for success against any future challenge.

"Egypt is the closest thing the Arab world has to a leader. As such it is probably a more useful ally than Iran ever could have been. Egypt was instrumental in assembling the Arab coalition against Iraq in the Persian Gulf War. . ."¹⁷

Does keeping Egypt as an ally mean supporting President Mubarak's regime at all costs? Although we would most likely

support him as long as he is in power, we must also recognize that our efforts militarily are limited. We can only provide security assistance to another sovereign state if requested by the government in power and even then, we do so at the risk of losing a future relationship with a new regime should our efforts fail.

Supporting strategic goals with military strategies: Dealing with countries during peacetime is often viewed as a strictly diplomatic effort. While much of our effort is through diplomacy and financial foreign aid, there is also much that can be done by the military in support of these goals. Since war is a continuation of policy, military activities during peacetime which prepare us for war or crisis can also help accomplish strategic goals as well. For example, military exercises and port visits demonstrate U.S. commitment to the region, providing "presence" while also providing coalition training for our military forces.

Preparing for the operational level of war: There is much work to be done in preparing for the operational level of war. In order to conduct regional operations, we need the support of other nations for access to ports and facilities, logistic support and sustainment, and forces capable of fighting in the regional environment. Interaction with Egypt by our military forces will be critical in ensuring our interoperability with

them during war. Although CENTCOM has used the much touted success of DESERT STORM to add legitimacy to their past strategies, preparing for future challenges in the Middle East will require continued vigilance and flexibility to the dynamics of constantly evolving political relationships, especially Egypt.

With the increasing emphasis on multi-lateral response, one of the most important areas of operational art is coalition warfare. President George Bush emphasized this point in our National Security Strategy:

"We must improve our ability to conduct coalition operations. . . In the final analysis, our armed forces must be prepared to respond rapidly, to deter, and, if necessary, to fight and win unilaterally or as a part of a coalition."¹⁸

Here again, CENTCOM will have to overcome the temptation of resting on the laurels of DESERT STORM. The conditions that existed there will not necessarily be repeated in a future conflict, nor can we expect to always rely on Saudia Arabia for our prepositioning and logistics support. Our relationships and military preparations with other Middle East countries, and particularly Egypt, will determine our flexibility to respond to future crisis.

Challenges to interoperability with Egyptian military forces.

In order to effectively operate with Egyptian military forces as part of a coalition, we must be able to achieve interoperability of both equipment and personnel. Egyptian

military forces still use Soviet equipment, much of which is outdated or difficult to maintain due to lack of replacement parts. The process of acquiring more modern military hardware is often haphazard and highly dependent on what is available in the post-Cold War "garage sale" of foreign military sales. The U.S. is attempting to counter the potential negative effects of this by providing funds for the purchase of American equipment to increase U.S.-Egyptian interoperability.

As for interoperability of personnel, language is still a major problem. Officer liaison programs are too small to provide a significant pool of language trained personnel. Even with Arabic as a regional language, the differences between countries require personnel trained in local dialects. Although many Egyptians are conversant in English, any lack of effort on our part to provide Arabic-speaking personnel or an expectation that they will speak "our language" would be construed as arrogant and undiplomatic.

Military exercises are one of our best strategies for military interoperability training, but are not frequent enough to adequately prepare our forces for coalition warfare.¹⁹ Military personnel involved in them often comment that while the leadership touts the success of exercises for publicity purposes, little was actually accomplished due to language barriers and equipment interoperability. Unfortunately our language and exercise programs are limited and will possibly even decrease with reduced defense budgets.

PROPOSED MILITARY STRATEGY FOR EGYPT

In order to be prepared for operating in a military coalition with Egyptian forces, or providing security assistance to combat a possible Islamic insurgency should the need arise, the following strategy is recommended for U.S.

Central Command staff:

- improved use of foreign aid funds for the purchase of military equipment capable of U.S. interoperability.

- increased U.S. training of Egyptian military personnel to increase Egyptian use of U.S. vice Soviet military doctrine.

- increased frequency of joint military exercises involving Egyptian forces, specifically designed to improve our ability to conduct coalition operations.

- continued U.S. presence through port visits, military exercises, and personnel liaison programs.

- sharing of intelligence information to improve both countries knowledge of potential regional threats and changing trends.

- conduct further analysis of the challenges CENTCOM would face in the event of conducting counter-insurgency operations within Egypt.

- increased intelligence analysis of the many socio-political and economic forces shaping Egypt, as well as the ability of their forces to conduct security during internal crisis.

COUNTERARGUMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Counterarguments. Due to the large number of countries worldwide with which we have relationships, one could argue that our military involvement with Egypt is balanced within the framework of our overall effort internationally to build allies and there is no reason to increase current efforts. This is merely a recognition of the reality of our limited resources. Even within this framework there is much room for improvement, and the strategic location of Egypt both geographically and politically can not be overstated. There should be no doubt that increased vigilance in our endeavors with Egypt politically and militarily will allow us to reap substantial benefits during future conflicts.

Many argue that U.S. foreign aid funds are too high and are being wasted away by President Mubarak's staff. Adjustments in these funds could be used as a diplomatic tool to let them know we are dissatisfied with their lack of improvement in economic programs. Unfortunately, this type of reward/punishment game is not likely to be effective and could fuel anti-Western attitudes.

Finally, since most analysts do not predict a takeover anytime soon, and there may be little we could do about it if it occurred, it could be considered useless to plan military operations to counter the Islamic threat. It is important to remember we are not planning operations that actually target the Islamic influence as a threat.²⁰ We should recognize it

as a political influence shaping the future of Egypt and the entire region, with potential destabilizing effects; and we should be prepared to react to potential conflicts that may result. Military planning at the operational level requires us to look at all potential threats in a region and conduct operations across the entire spectrum of conflict, including peace. And if our strategies during peace are merely diplomatic showmanship and do not have sufficient depth to prepare us for operational success in war, we will find ourselves greatly disappointed when called upon to fight.

Conclusions. If the U.S. and the international community can help Egypt's government and population face the economic and social challenges in the context of national self-determination and democracy rather than radical religious fundamentalism, they will be more likely to move into the future as a stable society. Any move to the extreme of a purely Islamic state would most likely result in bloodshed and violence since Egyptian society has both a wide variety of cultural diversity and a strong Western/secular influence.

Although we may look upon the Islamic Fundamentalist influence with trepidation, we should not expect that the only outcome is a military coup or takeover of Mubarak's government. Even if there is a threat, we can not, nor should we consider, any direct strategy to combat it. Our only appropriate strategy to combat its potential negative effects

is to encourage the Egyptian government to seek peaceful efforts to incorporate all political influences within Egypt, including Islamic Fundamentalism, through legitimate democratic processes.

At the operational level, we should ensure that our current strategies are not only supporting U.S. diplomatic efforts in peacetime, but will greatly enhance our military interoperability with Egyptian forces during future conflicts. This can only be done through improvement of current programs and increased attention to Egypt as one of our most critical allies.

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