



# LOOKING FORWARD

An Integrated Strategy for Supporting Democracy and  
Human Rights in Egypt

Gregory L. Aftandilian



Project on Middle East Democracy

May 2009

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## Executive Summary

As the Obama administration seeks to reorient its policy approach to the Middle East and improve relations with the region, the U.S.-Egypt relationship will inevitably be at the heart of that effort. This has already been demonstrated, as Hillary Clinton began her first visit to the Middle East as Secretary of State with a stop in Egypt. Meanwhile, President Mubarak will on May 26 make his first visit to the White House in more than five years. President Obama has also announced that he has chosen Egypt as the location for a major address to the Muslim world on June 4. U.S. interests in the Middle East are best served by a strong U.S. relationship with a strong Egypt.

Meanwhile, this is also a critical moment in Egypt. Recent years have seen increasing signs of public discontent with the status quo, accompanied by a series of regressive measures by the Egyptian regime. The aging President Mubarak, now 81 years old, is unlikely to serve beyond the end of his current term in 2011, raising the question of succession and increasing the importance of reform efforts that might breathe new life into Egypt's political system. This moment of transition in Egypt, following the change in American administrations, can and should be viewed as a genuine opportunity for reform. It is also one fraught with risk if reforms are further delayed.

Given longstanding American policy, the U.S. cannot be neutral on reform and human rights in Egypt. As a large stakeholder providing the Egyptian government with more than \$1.5 billion in aid annually, the United States will, by default, be on the side of the authoritarian status quo if it does not demonstrate a commitment to the rights of the Egyptian people. On the other hand, the U.S. relationship with the Egyptian regime also serves American strategic interests, and any attempt to promote democracy that neglects the importance of the bilateral relationship is unlikely to succeed.

What is needed is a middle ground – a new strategy for American policy toward Egypt that neither neglects concerns for human rights and democracy nor pursues them in isolation from other policy priorities. By more thoroughly integrating U.S. support for gradual democratic reform into the broader bilateral policy, such efforts can be made more consistent over time and, ultimately, more effective.

To identify elements of such a strategy, the Project on Middle East Democracy convened a series of roundtable discussions in Washington among leading American, Egyptian, and European policy experts, advocates, and analysts to explore ideas for a new policy approach to Egypt. The result, outlined in the following pages, is a new, integrated strategy for supporting Egyptian democracy through a variety of policy instruments.

## **Key Recommendations:**

### **Change the Tone**

Adopt a balanced public tone that is consistently supportive of the rights of all Egyptians.

### **Establish a Strategic Dialogue**

Launch a regular forum for addressing sensitive reform issues behind closed doors.

### **Use Positive Conditionality to Encourage Reform**

Offer a new, multilateral package of economic aid and trade benefits if reform benchmarks are met.

### **Bolster Effective Democracy Assistance Programs**

Focus on civil society programs for a diverse sector of independent Egyptian actors.

### **Step Up Interagency Coordination**

Strengthen mechanisms for policy coordination, consistent with a prioritization of reform in the bilateral relationship.

### **Work with Europe**

Seek opportunities for multilateral dialogue on reform goals and criteria, toward the goal of coordinating initiatives and incentives.

### **Engage with Political Opposition Movements**

Engage with a variety of opposition actors, including nonviolent Islamists.

Together, these steps constitute a new, integrated approach for supporting the rights of the Egyptian people and their desire for substantive reform without disregarding the host of other policy concerns and interests that influence U.S. policy toward Egypt.

## Acknowledgments

Many people deserve thanks for their valuable contributions to the ideas put forth in this paper. This includes more than two dozen individuals who participated in a series of roundtable discussions in Washington D.C. in late 2008 and early 2009. This group provided insight and a diversity of perspectives on confronting the difficult challenges of effectively supporting democracy and human rights in Egypt. The author would especially like to thank Chris Assaad, research associate at the Project on Middle East Democracy, who provided invaluable research assistance.

## Introduction: *Why Encourage Political Reform?*

The U.S.-Egyptian relationship has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East since the Camp David Accords in 1978. Every U.S. President since that time has sought to preserve and enhance ties with the Egyptian regime, which encompass cooperation on military, security, political and economic issues, even when there have been tensions in the relationship. As the most populous country in the Arab world, situated in the heart of the Middle East and neighbor to the volatile Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Egypt will remain a key to U.S. policy in the region. With its long intellectual traditions in both the secular and religious realms, and its institutions of higher learning and civic organizations, Egypt is in many respects a bellwether of broader social and political trends in the region. In short, internal developments in Egypt and U.S. relations with the Egyptian government and people are watched closely by others across the region. American policy toward Egypt sends a strong signal of the U.S. administration's broader priorities in the Middle East.

While valuing this close relationship, many U.S. policymakers as well as some influential members of the U.S. Congress have come to view the Egyptian government as internally stagnant, resistant to meaningful political reform, and, at times, highly repressive. While changes have occurred on the margins, and the press is generally freer than in the past, the basic authoritarian structure of the Egyptian political system remains fundamentally unchanged since the 1952 Revolution. Egypt is run by a president with overwhelming powers, backed by strong military and security establishments. The political system is dominated by a single party, which acts in turn as an arm of the state. Democratic reformers, while able to publicly vent their frustrations from time to time, are prevented from significantly altering this system. After tentative signs of political opening in 2005, the internal situation has since regressed, marked by widespread arrests of journalists, bloggers, labor organizers, and other activists who have aired political or economic grievances against the regime. Looming over this troubling situation are speculation that Mubarak is grooming his son to inherit his seat, a weak and divided political opposition, and deteriorating economic conditions for the average citizen. Egypt is in a period of severe socioeconomic stress and political uncertainty.

In recent decades, U.S. administrations have engaged in support for democracy in Egypt, though their commitment, motivation, and means have varied. While humanitarian considerations have played a role, calculations that political reform would serve the cause of Egypt's stability have also spurred U.S. efforts to support democracy. Democracy programs have been administered through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) as well as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), launched in 2002 by the Bush Administration. High-ranking U.S. officials have also at times applied pressure on the Egyptian leadership to free particular dissidents or opposition figures, or to reform the electoral process.

Although some programs, particularly smaller-scale grant programs for civil society development, have had modest success, the overall thrust of U.S. democracy programs has not made an appreciable dent in the nature of authoritarianism in Egypt. Given the Egyptian government's resistance to change, and the country's strategic importance, some observers argue that the United States should exempt Egypt from any democratization agenda. Some also predict that any political change is likely to benefit the main opposition group in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood, which may not share U.S. strategic and political goals in the region. Implicit in their critique is the question: Why bother?

First, democracy promotion has been an essential part of U.S. foreign policy for many decades. As President Obama stated on January 15 to the editors of the *Washington Post* shortly before his inauguration: "Well, I think [promotion of freedom or democracy] needs to be a central part of our foreign policy. It is who we are. It is one of our best exports, if it is not exported simply down the barrel of a gun."<sup>1</sup> Granted, U.S. policymakers, for a variety of reasons, neglected the Middle East in its democracy promotion efforts for much of the past century, but such neglect no longer appears sustainable in the long-term. The United States should support the democratic aspirations of the people of the Middle East, including Egyptians, out of principled adherence to its own national values.

Second, a clear majority of Egyptian people yearn for democratic governance, according to numerous public opinion surveys.<sup>2</sup> There is an increasingly widespread understanding that a more open political environment will lead to improved governance and more economic and political opportunities for their children and grandchildren.

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Third, the authoritarian status quo in Egypt is simply untenable in the long term. In 2008, there were at least 323 incidents of demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins across the nation organized by industrial workers, farmers, university professors, doctors, and journalists alike.<sup>3</sup> Such incidents have seen a sharp rise over the past three years, as the Egyptian population has become less willing to passively accept the status quo. While Egypt is unlikely to experience a violent revolution resembling the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979, it should be remembered that there were periods of severe unrest preceding the recent decades of stability. The immediate post-World War II era (1945-52) in particular was host to numerous domestic and foreign policy crises which turned violent.

Fourth, because of this potential for instability, it behooves the United States to work toward a more open political system in Egypt. The contestation of ideas and policies in the political arena—and not through violence—serves both Egyptian stability and U.S. national security interests.

Fifth, as mentioned at the outset, U.S. policy toward Egypt inevitably sets the tone for U.S. policy toward the region more broadly. American support for autocracy in Egypt has long been a fundamental complaint of Egyptians and other Arabs, who point to the chasm between the rhetoric of the U.S. government on democracy and its policies. The perception that the United States is aligned with the Egyptian government at the expense of Egypt's citizens has undermined U.S. credibility not just in Egypt but throughout the region. Credible, sincere support for human rights and democracy in Egypt would greatly assist in restoring U.S. credibility across the region and would enhance U.S. efforts to support democracy and to pursue other policy goals across the region.

Neglecting political reform today risks large-scale consequences for U.S. interests in the region going forward. The challenge for U.S. policy is how to integrate a practicable strategy for supporting democracy into the bilateral relationship with Egypt, without neglecting other key policy objectives. Given that autocracy in Egypt will not vanish overnight and that U.S. policymakers will generally want to stay in the good graces of the Egyptian government to pursue common goals, such as advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process, a question arises that should guide our efforts:

*What policies and approaches are achievable in the short-term that would advance the goal of democracy in the long-term?*

## Nature of the U.S.-Egypt Relationship

Since the 1978 signing of the Camp David Accords, the United States and Egypt have developed extensive ties. The countries have shared the vision of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict by peaceful means. Moreover, Egypt, as the sole Arab country to have had a peace treaty with Israel for fifteen years, became a valuable conduit to convey Arab concerns to Israel, facilitating U.S. peace endeavors in the region.

In addition, Egypt, which reversed course from being a Soviet ally to an American one in the 1970s, has assisted the U.S. in pursuing strategic objectives in the region. Egypt's military, through U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF), began purchasing American military hardware, and its officer corps developed a pro-U.S. orientation through annual training programs and joint exercises, like Bright Star.<sup>4</sup> This assistance enabled the United States to enjoy logistical support during times of crisis, including the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when the U.S. military needed Egypt's support for hundreds of overflights through its airspace and ship transits through the Suez Canal. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report of 2006 noted that, some years later, from 2001 to 2005, Egypt provided over-flight permission to 36,553 U.S. military aircraft and granted expedited transit of 861 U.S. naval ships through the Suez Canal.<sup>5</sup>

Politically, Egypt has also been generally supportive of U.S. policy initiatives in the region, with the exception of the decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003. In the 1990-1991 Gulf War, Egypt assisted diplomatically in persuading more than half of the Arab League members to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a move that facilitated the introduction of large numbers of U.S. and coalition forces into Saudi Arabia to protect the oil-rich Saudi kingdom and to liberate Kuwait.

Egypt has also assisted the United States throughout the Arab-Israeli peace process of the past three decades. Although it has not always seen eye-to-eye with the U.S. on every detail, Egypt has continued to play a significant role on the Palestinian issue, brokering cease-fires between Hamas and Israel, and trying to bring about Palestinian reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. Because the United States and Israel will not speak to Hamas directly, Egypt has at times played an important mediating role, despite its own misgivings about Hamas' intentions and policies. On the other hand, some are suspicious of Egypt's motives with regard to the peace process, arguing that the

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Mubarak government is not genuinely interested in a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather, exploits it to increase its own importance in the region and to distract from domestic political issues.

On other regional issues, Egypt has been supportive of U.S. efforts to check Iran's regional ambitions in the Gulf and among radical factions and movements in the Arab world. Egypt shares American concerns that Iran is fostering instability in the region through its allies, such as Hizbullah. Egypt also sees Iran's nuclear program as a threat and has strongly supported international efforts, led by the United States, to compel Iran to reveal all of its nuclear-related operations and abide by IAEA guidelines.

Egypt has been the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid for several decades, a result of the Camp David Accords. Military assistance via FMF has long held steady at about \$1.3 billion a year. Annual economic aid, disbursed via the Economic Support Fund (ESF), has in recent years been gradually reduced to \$200 million, after holding steady for many years at roughly \$800 million. Although Egypt has long resented receiving less aid than Israel, U.S. assistance has helped to modernize its armed forces, as detailed in a GAO report of 2006 noting that U.S. military aid accounts for 80 percent of Egypt's military procurement budget.<sup>6</sup> On the civilian side, U.S. economic assistance has led to improvements in Egypt's infrastructure, such as telecommunications and water and sewage treatment.

American and Egyptian security services have cooperated closely on terrorism issues, and President Mubarak has hosted several international counterterrorism conferences in Egypt that have supported U.S. policy.

Egypt has supported these policies in large part for its own national security goals and regional interests, a fact which sustains cooperation even amid tensions in the bilateral relationship. During the Bush Administration, U.S.-Egyptian ties were perceived at times to be severely challenged by disagreements over political reform. Symbolic aspects of the relationship, such as President Mubarak's annual visit to Washington, suffered as a result of U.S. democracy promotion rhetoric and policies. However, it should be noted that Egypt never withdrew nor even threatened to withdraw fundamental strategic cooperation, even when tensions peaked between the two governments.

This suggests that the widespread perception that U.S. pressure on Egypt to reform will harm the United States' short-term interests is not necessarily the case.<sup>7</sup>

## Problems with the Bush Administration Approach

To his credit, President George W. Bush was the first U.S. President to speak out against past U.S. support for authoritarianism in the Middle East, and he spoke forcefully in support of the civil and political rights of the region's citizens. President Obama, a few days before his own inauguration, while critical of his predecessor's policies on the issue, nonetheless said he did not discount "the sincerity and worthiness of President Bush's concerns about democracy and human rights..."<sup>8</sup> Although a full examination of the Bush approach is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that, for a time, democracy promotion became an important component of U.S. policy toward the region via two policies: 1) establishing a model democracy in Iraq supported by the American military occupation of that country, and 2) applying, at least for a time, pressure on some friendly, authoritarian regimes to democratize or at least take meaningful measures to open up their political systems.

In Egypt and much of the region, the Bush administration's approach ultimately failed, as lofty rhetoric in support of democratic goals failed to translate into tangible changes on the ground. Although the stability of Iraq is today improving, with recently held provincial elections that were reasonably free and fair, its future remains uncertain. The violence that marred the country in the first five years after the U.S.-led invasion, and the rise of sectarianism accompanying this violence, have made Iraq a model that few in the Middle East wish to emulate. As for pressure on authoritarian allies, leaders in the region felt threatened by Bush's rhetoric—particularly statements labeling dissidents the "future leaders of your free country"<sup>9</sup>—interpreting this as undermining the legitimacy of their rule, and as being ungrateful for their support of U.S. policies, often against the sentiments of their populations.

Pressure from the United States in 2005, in combination with the efforts of democratic reformers and activists within Egypt, moved the Egyptian government to take modest steps towards democratization. After initially resisting such pressure, President Mubarak agreed to hold multi-candidate presidential elections for the first time. The Egyptian government released liberal opposition politician Ayman Nour (widely believed to have been incarcerated on trumped-up charges) on bail after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice canceled a visit to Cairo in March 2005 to underscore her displeasure with his

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arrest.<sup>10</sup> In addition, some restrictions were relaxed to allow for election campaigning, though police used violence against some opposition protestors who believed the constitutional changes were insufficient.

Washington kept up the pressure on Cairo that summer. In June, Secretary of State Rice traveled to Cairo where she delivered a hard-hitting speech at the American University of Cairo in which she called on the Egyptian government to undertake specific measures, including conducting the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in a freer and fairer manner than in the past.<sup>11</sup>

The Egyptian presidential election of early September 2005 was marred by irregularities but was considered by the United States and democratic reformers as being a relative improvement over previous elections, in which Mubarak had won upwards of 95% of the vote in an uncontested referendum. This time, President Mubarak received about 88% of the vote, and Ayman Nour received 7.6%, while other candidates got far less. U.S. officials said they hoped the subsequent November-December parliamentary elections would demonstrate further improvement. Another key development of the 2005 Presidential election – perhaps more significant than the result – was that the Egyptian government for the first time permitted large scale civilian monitoring of elections as a result of combined pressure from the U.S. and EU. While observers highlighted some causes for concern, this monitoring was nonetheless a key step toward increasing the legitimacy of the Egyptian electoral process.

U.S. officials, however, appeared to have underestimated President Mubarak's resistance to U.S. pressure to reform. Most likely, he and his advisers wished to demonstrate to the United States that there were no secular alternatives to the status quo and that democracy would end up benefitting Islamists opposed to U.S. interests. In contrast to previous elections, when the Egyptian government would round up hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood activists, during the 2005 parliamentary elections they actually released Brotherhood activists from prison, even afforded the Brotherhood's General Guide an interview in the semi-official newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, and allowed the Brotherhood to campaign more openly using officially banned religious slogans. At the same time, the government again brought charges against Ayman Nour, interfering with his efforts to campaign actively for his party. The strategy seems to have been to allow some Brotherhood gains, while squeezing the secular-liberals to leave the U.S. and the West

with a stark choice between “us” (the Mubarak regime and the NDP) or “them” (the feared Brotherhood).<sup>12</sup>

As the parliamentary elections were held in three stages, the first round witnessed the defeat of Ayman Nour in his home district (most likely due to government interference) and the defeat of most Wafd (a secular conservative party) candidates. But the Brotherhood scored even more victories than the NDP had anticipated (more than doubling its seats in parliament in the first round of voting alone), and the ruling party candidates performed poorly, reflecting widespread public dissatisfaction with the regime. The government then went into panic mode, using violence, intimidation, and voter suppression to ensure that the ruling party would win at least two-thirds of the seats, while limiting the Brotherhood to twenty percent of the seats. Small, secular parties received only about 3 percent of the seats.

U.S. officials, as President Mubarak expected, were alarmed by the Brotherhood’s gains as they went from seventeen to eighty-eight seats in the lower house of parliament. As a result, the U.S. quickly muted its criticism of the government’s use of violence and other gross irregularities that marred the parliamentary elections. Democratic reformers in Egypt were deeply disappointed, and the Egyptian government became emboldened, sentencing Ayman Nour to five years in prison. The following month witnessed elections in the neighboring Palestinian territories, in which Hamas won a narrow but decisive victory. The victory by the Brotherhood’s ideological ally further worried American policymakers. Although Washington did issue a statement against the sentencing of Ayman Nour and put off free-trade negotiations with Egypt, other punitive actions that may have been contemplated were not carried out. In February 2006, Secretary Rice returned to Egypt, but this time the discussions were dominated by regional issues such as the Iranian nuclear program and the Palestinian political situation, not democratization.<sup>13</sup> And in the spring of 2006, when pro-democracy activists staged demonstrations in Cairo in support of two prominent judges who refused to acquiesce to the government’s manipulation of the parliamentary elections, the U.S. response was also rather weak—a few critical statements but little else. Later that spring, President Mubarak’s son Gamal, a high-ranking NDP official and a possible successor, visited the White House to urge “understanding” of the Egyptian government’s hard-line policies against dissidents and activists.<sup>14</sup>

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The United States wound up with the worst of both worlds. It brought about tensions with a friendly regime, but at the same time it also angered democracy advocates who felt abandoned by the U.S. failure to follow-through with punitive measures in response to the Egyptian regime's clear manipulation of the elections and its backtracking on democratic promises. After raising expectations that the U.S. policy had fundamentally changed, by 2006, U.S. pressure on Egypt to reform was no longer a priority.

# Assessing the State of Egyptian Political Reform

As expressed above, the general trends on political reform in Egypt in recent years have been uneven, and can be broadly characterized as showing several distinct signs of progress in 2004 and 2005, while generally regressing since 2006. It is worth surveying briefly the state of political reform in Egypt in several key areas.

## **Freedom of Press and Expression**

In general, the Egyptian press is now freer than it was in the past. A number of independent newspapers have emerged in the past decade, led by *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Dustour*. Moreover, with the proliferation of satellite television networks and the internet, the Egyptian government has shifted away from a strategy of trying to strictly control speech through direct censorship. Whereas in the past, the government would respond to offensive newspaper articles by removing all copies of the offending issue from the streets and/or shutting down the publication in which it appeared, today the government relies more on selective intimidation of journalists and bloggers and arrests under defamation or libel charges. Such moves send a warning to the broader community of Egyptian journalists and bloggers as to red lines that are not to be crossed.

## **Political Parties**

The ruling NDP dominates Egypt's political scene, controlling 324 of 454 seats in the People's Assembly of the Egyptian Parliament. Egypt's authoritarian system and laws place numerous impediments in the way of political parties' formation, development, and operation. For example, an opposition party cannot hold a meeting or an outdoor rally without the approval of the interior ministry under current laws. In addition, political parties are banned from organizing activities and recruiting student members on university campuses, which has had the effect of leaving the field open to the Islamists who use ostensibly "nonpolitical" associations to recruit students. The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest and most organized political opposition movement, remains officially banned, although its members have been permitted to run in elections as independents without hiding their affiliation with the organization.

**Elections**

During the 1990s, Egyptian elections were marred by widespread violence and fraud. The 2000 parliamentary elections were the first supervised by Egypt's judges, and were generally seen as more credible than previous elections. The NDP's performance was humiliating, as it initially won only 38 percent of the seats, with the majority going to independent candidates who did, however, later join the NDP's governing coalition. In early 2005, Article 76 of the Egyptian constitution was amended to allow for direct popular election of the president, as opposed to confirmation of the parliament's appointed choice via referendum. The 2005 elections were also the first to be monitored by independent Egyptian nongovernmental organizations. Although this fell short of U.S. and EU calls for international election monitors, it was nonetheless a positive step. However, the gains in the 2005 elections were reversed in the elections for the Shura Council in 2007 and the local municipal elections in April 2008, both of which were derided as unfairly contested and evidence of "a return to the old authoritarian practices of the ruling establishment."<sup>15</sup>

**Presidential Succession**

President Hosni Mubarak, now 81 years old, has ruled as Egypt's president since 1981. He is serving his fifth six-year term as president, which is due to expire in 2011. Although many observers believe that President Mubarak is grooming his son Gamal to be the next president, the regime has officially denied such intentions.<sup>16</sup> Gamal, currently the Deputy Secretary General of the NDP and the Chairman of its Policy Secretariat, visited Washington in March 2009 and met with U.S. policymakers and Middle East analysts. The visit stirred speculation that he was testing the waters to see how he might be received in Washington as president. Others anticipate the accession of Lieutenant General Omar Suleiman or another military leader.<sup>17</sup> In any case, it is widely believed that President Hosni Mubarak intends to step down at the end of his current term, if he is not forced to do so beforehand for health reasons.

## Lessons Learned for U.S. Policy

Major lessons from the successes and failures of previous administrations, which can inform a comprehensive approach for supporting Egyptian democracy, can be summarized as follows:

### *Public Rhetoric and Communication*

**Words matter.** In public declarations, U.S. officials must take care to enunciate realistic goals in terms of a democracy agenda for the region. U.S. officials should be careful not to use words that can be interpreted as threatening the legitimacy of existing ruling structures in a country like Egypt. Careless or overly ambitious rhetoric may yield a backlash and undermine U.S. goals. On the other hand, the administration must also take care not to downplay the importance of democracy in its public statements. Democratic reformers and activists in Egypt have noted the absence of rhetoric about democracy in the opening months of the administration, and were particularly troubled by Secretary Clinton's remarks in Egypt in March, which were perceived to be downplaying human rights concerns in Egypt as cited in the State Department's own human rights reports.<sup>18</sup>

**It is important to be realistic about how democracy fits into the overall relationship.** Administration officials can and should describe democracy as one of the top priorities for U.S. policy but not *the* top priority. Even the most ardent democratic reformers in Egypt understand that Washington has strategic interests in its relationship with Cairo that will not be neglected for the sake of supporting democracy. But by saying democracy promotion is a top priority, it also reminds the Egyptian government that Washington still expects movement on political reform, and that the issue is not going away despite the change of U.S. administrations. At the same time, speaking frankly about the place of other interests in the bilateral relationship will enhance U.S. credibility when addressing democracy.

**Personalizing the democratization effort can undermine its effectiveness.** Among the most prominent efforts by the previous U.S. administration to support democracy were the pressures applied to the Egyptian government to urge the release from prison of

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Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Ayman Nour. American pressure seems to have yielded mixed results in these two cases, but with estimates of the number of political prisoners in Egypt as high as 16,000 to 18,000, the outsized attention to these two cases highlights the neglect of thousands of other such cases. Such narrow focus on a few high-profile cases risks fueling the perception that U.S. priorities are based on the specific personalities involved, rather than a principled and comprehensive stand against the policy of jailing and torture of political dissidents. Furthermore, direct U.S. attention to the case of a specific political activist may also undermine the credibility and legitimacy of that individual within Egypt domestically. That is not to say that the U.S. should not speak out against such violations of basic freedoms, but that it should do so consistently and in a principled manner, and should avoid personalizing such criticism.

**While speaking openly of the need for political freedom, targeted demands for political reform may be expressed more effectively through private, but forceful, diplomatic engagement.** Openly demanding specific reforms may be portrayed by the regime as “imperialist” interference in Egyptian affairs. The pride of the Egyptian government in the public sphere is important, and U.S. officials should avoid the perception that they are publicly lecturing Egyptian officials about how to run their country. Such talk is portrayed by Egyptian officials as imperialist intervention, stirring up nationalist sentiments in the country against the United States. On the other hand, if the Egyptian government does move ahead by opening up political space in the country, and reforming restrictive laws that hinder political party activity, then the United States should praise these measures publicly to underscore its support for the Egyptian government and the Egyptian people.

#### *Private Diplomacy*

**Some sensitive issues may be addressed more effectively through private discussions, but the importance of visible progress must be made clear.** The Egyptian government is reluctant to be viewed as caving to specific external demands, and it aims to portray such demands as “imperialist” interference in Egyptian affairs. More progress may be made through private discussions, but U.S. officials should stress that while they are willing to discuss sensitive issues of reform behind closed doors, there must be substantive, publicly visible progress. The details of strategies or approaches for reform

may be kept private, but in the absence of real progress on reform, the Egyptian people will assume that the U.S. is supporting the authoritarian status quo. However, if U.S. officials are able to assure the Egyptian people in public that the U.S. and Egyptian governments are working together on political reform, and demonstrable steps are then taken in this regard, U.S. credibility with the Egyptian public will be improved.

**A formal forum for regular diplomatic dialogue can be productive.** Under the Clinton administration, the U.S. and Egypt conducted regular strategic dialogue meetings widely seen as productive, but focused on issues of economic reform and regional security, rather than political reform. During the Bush administration, such meetings were held irregularly, were suspended on several occasions, and were without a clear agenda. The effective format for bilateral meetings during the Clinton administration can be the basis for a regular forum to address issues of democratic reform. Although some Egyptian officials may resent a discussion about political reform even behind closed doors, others will appreciate the fact that the United States is handling the issue with sensitivity. In addition, some members of the Egyptian government and the ruling NDP, particularly those of the younger generation, are already on record in support of political reform, and understand that the status quo is untenable over the long run. Establishing a regular forum for discussing such issues in private should help keep some sensitive issues out of public statements or discussions, while continuing to lay the groundwork for positive change.

**Topics should be addressed carefully, stressing that political reform is in the interests of Egypt's long-term stability.** Recent remarks by a former Egyptian ambassador to the United States underscore the importance of American concern for Egypt's stability when discussing issues of democratization. Former ambassador Nabil Fahmi stated in January of this year that no U.S. president can afford "not to support democracy or safeguard human rights... the promotion of democracy, like market economics, through strategic and patient support of institution building and community evolution rather than public rabble-rousing rhetoric would be more effective, less problematic, and would create a much more conducive environment for a beneficial relationship."<sup>19</sup> Fahmi's words on the counter-productiveness of "rabble-rousing rhetoric" should be considered carefully, although such assertions in support of promoting democracy should be seized upon.

**Private discussions on political reform should include strategies for lifting restrictions on political party activity.** Discussion about the need to reform such laws will touch on sensitive subjects to be sure, including allegations that the Egyptian government routinely foments internal divisions within many political parties.<sup>20</sup> Such difficult discussions go to the heart of the matter, however, and should not be avoided.

Such discussions should also focus on the need for greater press freedom. A vibrant free press should play a key role in democratic development in Egypt, and journalists should not be jailed for writing critical articles about government leaders, including the president. U.S. officials should not avoid this subject with Egyptian officials, emphasizing that such arrests not only hinder democratic development within Egypt, but also damage Egypt's image abroad.

**The presidential succession issue should also be raised during private discussions**

The fact that the first presidential succession in nearly 30 years will likely take place during the first term of the Obama administration will loom over other discussions, and will inevitably need to be addressed. In this context, the U.S. should support constitutional processes, focusing on laws and institutions rather than personalities, and avoid playing favorites among potential successors. The U.S. should engage with the Egyptian government to reach consensus on measures that can be taken to make Egypt's presidential transition process more legitimately democratic, including loosening some restrictions on potential presidential candidates. The U.S. should also encourage participating political parties, including the ruling NDP, to adopt more democratic intraparty processes to determine their presidential candidates.

**The conduct and fairness of elections remain important and must not be ignored.**

Many U.S. policymakers, including President Obama, have criticized the Bush administration approach to democratization as placing too much emphasis on elections in the Middle East as the sole measure of democracy.<sup>21</sup> The electoral victory by Hamas, and strong electoral gains by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt discouraged many U.S. government officials from pressing for free elections in the region, fearing that groups perceived as inimical to U.S. interests may rise to power. However, it would be both inconsistent and morally untenable for the United States not to press for freer elections when it is pressing for greater political space and freedoms in Egypt, as elections are the only way for political parties to gain seats in parliament and have a stronger voice in the

shaping of policy. In raising this issue, U.S. officials can emphasize that having more diverse representation in parliament will not undermine Egyptian stability but enhance it, as most of these parties support the government on fundamental issues related to security.

### *Using Foreign Assistance*

There has long been a debate among Egyptian democratic reformers, human rights activists, and some U.S. policymakers about leveraging foreign aid to bring about political reform. Some have argued that when dealing with a recalcitrant authoritarian government that is a recipient of U.S. largess, cutting or conditioning aid sends a strong message and will compel such a government to move ahead with reforms. Others have argued that cutting or conditioning aid will have the opposite effect, angering host government officials to such a degree that they will be less inclined to support reform than before, with the United States losing leverage in the process.<sup>22</sup> U.S. administrations have taken the latter counsel to heart, though an exception to this occurred in 2003 as President Bush withheld \$130 million in supplemental aid requested by Egypt over the incarceration of democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen (he was released soon thereafter). In 2006, however, the Bush administration lobbied Congress hard not to cut aid to Egypt even when democracy activists, showing solidarity with two Egyptian judges who were on trial for speaking out against the government's conduct in the previous year's parliamentary elections, were beaten in the streets of Cairo.

Although the U.S. Congress has generally followed various administrations' lead in not reducing aid to Egypt, it has on occasion exhibited dissatisfaction and even anger at Egypt over some of its policies. Beginning in 2005, Congress earmarked some \$50 million in ESF funds specifically for democracy promotion assistance, and in early 2008, withheld \$100 million (out of the usual \$1.3 billion) in FMF assistance unless the Egyptian government took measures to increase the independence of the judiciary, curb police abuses, and prevent the smuggling of arms from Egypt into Gaza. However, this measure contained a waiver on the conditions if deemed in the interest of U.S. national security, which Secretary Rice exercised in March of that year.<sup>23</sup>

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In March of this year, Congress surprisingly included in the FY2009 omnibus appropriations act a clause limiting the portion of the ESF funds that could be spent on democracy and governance to no more than \$20 million. This is a severe reduction that will require cuts in existing programs, as \$45 million or more in such funds were appropriated in Fiscal Years 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008. Moreover, this earmarked cap on funding represents a dramatic reversal, as Congress in previous years had always earmarked a minimum for democracy and governance programs in Egypt. Moreover, President Obama's first budget request, for Fiscal Year 2010, reinforces this reduction, calling for the same figure of \$20 million to be spent on democracy and governance programs in Egypt.

In reality, overall U.S. assistance to Egypt has been on a steady downward slope for quite some time when inflation and reductions in ESF are taken into account. Although military aid of \$1.3 billion has held steady for almost three decades, in real terms it has actually declined. And economic assistance has dropped in nominal terms from more than \$800 million in 1998 to only \$200 million in the Fiscal Year 2009 omnibus appropriations act passed by Congress in March. Given this downward trend in U.S. aid, a further cut in U.S. assistance may not be the best strategy at the current juncture.

#### **Positive, rather than negative, conditionality is the option more likely**

**to gain support from policymakers.** Egyptians have long complained, given the fact that U.S. aid grew out of the Camp David Accords where Egypt and Israel were supposed to be seen as equal partners, that they receive less aid than Israel while being cooperative with the United States on the peace process and other regional issues. Given the volatility of the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Egypt's diplomatic efforts to calm things down and support a negotiated settlement, it is hard to imagine that U.S. policymakers would want to risk angering the Egyptian leadership by supporting further cuts in assistance. Moreover, U.S. military assistance has earned the United States much goodwill with the Egyptian military, and a cut in military aid would likely hurt those ties and might lessen cooperation on vital security issues. However, the government of Egypt has shown a clear interest in increasing U.S. economic aid to the country. This provides an opportunity to offer new economic incentives, including additional economic assistance as well as beneficial agreements on trade, as a reward for meeting specified political reform benchmarks. This is essentially the strategy employed by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which would allow the Egyptian regime

to earn economic rewards that are in the interest of all Egyptians by implementing genuine reforms. This would encourage such reforms without endangering the existing relationship with the Egyptian military.

**Despite the restricted political atmosphere, many independent Egyptian NGOs and civil society organizations do play an important role.** Egyptian NGOs provided important independent monitoring of the 2005 elections, and have been instrumental in raising human rights concerns and supporting free political expression. Effective programs should be strengthened, particularly those aimed at funding civil society organizations, and NGOs that monitor parliament and the judiciary. Small local organizations operating outside of the more restricted political atmosphere of Cairo and Alexandria, often play a key role in monitoring the status of human rights and government institutions, building active political participation at the community level. Given the Egyptian government's tight control over NGOs, care should be given to ensure funds are distributed to entities that act as independently as possible in the restricted political atmosphere. This should include funding for civil society organizations affiliated with various opposition movements in Egypt, including nonviolent Islamist groups.

**Institutions that are necessary for a functioning democracy should be supported and strengthened even if they are currently under the control of the authoritarian state, and more efforts need to be made to reach out to reform-minded members of parliament.** Currently, USAID funds parliamentary visits by Egyptian legislators to the United States to learn about important functions such as parliamentary oversight, political campaign processes, and constituent outreach. However, such parliamentary exchange and training programs focus overwhelmingly on NDP members close to the regime or "safe" opposition figures. This program should be expanded to include more independent-minded NDP members and a full array of opposition members, including those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. An effective and independent parliament, not a rubber-stamp institution, will help build democracy over the long-term.

**Exchanges between judiciaries of both countries should be expanded and supported.** The judiciary in Egypt is one of the most respected institutions in the country, and some judges have been outspoken in calling on the government to uphold the rule of law at crucial moments, including elections.<sup>24</sup> Previous USAID funding

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for visits by Egyptian judges to the United States should be expanded and a long-term exchange program established. Following the experience of parliamentary exchanges, the Egyptian government will likely insist at first that only pro-government judges be able to take part in such a program. As such exchanges become regularized over time, however, U.S. judges should insist that a broader range of their Egyptian counterparts be included. American judges should also visit Egypt. A two-way exchange program would demonstrate American respect for the Egyptian judiciary, an important message to impart to Egyptian citizens and government officials alike.

**Programs should be developed and funded, for exchange visits between Egyptian professional syndicates and their U.S. counterparts.** Although there are differences between such groups as the American Bar Association and the Egyptian Lawyers' Syndicate, on a professional basis the two sides share concerns for their professions and seek a strong voice in the political arena. Egypt's professional syndicates, made up of lawyers, doctors, engineers, and journalists, have long been respected institutions that have played a key role in Egyptian society. In more recent years, they have also become venues of contestation between the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of the Mubarak regime, leading the government to enact laws to hinder Brotherhood gains on syndicate boards and to put several syndicates under sequestration. Despite these problems, the syndicates represent Egyptian middle class professionals (with all of their ideological cleavages), and hence the backbone of a nascent democracy. Although the government will be reluctant to loosen its reins on these syndicates, U.S. professional organizations, with the backing and funding of USAID, should develop a visitors program to bring Egyptian professionals to the United States on fellowships, to work alongside their U.S. counterparts and be exposed to their lobbying efforts. U.S. professionals should also be encouraged to visit Egypt's professional syndicates to underscore their respect for these institutions.

**U.S. support for international NGOs that develop civic education programs for Egyptians is critical to long-term democracy promotion efforts.** Education can be a sensitive subject, especially in a country that was once under foreign domination like Egypt, and hence a direct U.S. role in the shaping of a primary or secondary school curriculum would not be advisable. However, some international NGOs, like Junior Achievement, have a strong track record working in different regions of the world, including states of the former Soviet Union and some Middle Eastern countries.

**Greater efforts should also be made to allow Egyptian students to study at U.S. universities.** An increase in Egyptian student exchanges would expose the younger generation of Egyptian intellectuals to the diversity of the United States and the open political contestation of ideas and policy. Efforts should also be made to invite younger political party members and democracy activists to the United States for political training sessions and exposure to the different branches of government. Some of this activity already takes place through U.S. government grants to institutions such as the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and Freedom House. The expansion of these programs would serve long-term democracy promotion goals. U.S. military leaders have long praised the benefits of the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program that brings foreign military officers to the United States, and a similar commitment is needed on the civilian side.

### *Reforming U.S. Interagency Coordination*

Effective support for Egyptian democracy requires improved cooperation and coordination among U.S. government agencies. Agencies often work at cross-purposes with little coordination, preventing the consistent implementation of U.S. policy towards Egypt. Bureaucratic differences in agenda have allowed autocratic regimes to play one American agency against another, in order to side-step demands for reform. Similarly, many regimes attempt to directly communicate with the White House in order to bypass “troublesome” U.S. bureaucracies. Policy implementation must be coordinated across agencies in order to effectively work towards clearly outlined reform goals.

Concern for the advancement of democracy in Egypt should be factored into every major U.S. policy decision on Egypt. Although some agencies are not directly involved in democracy promotion, many have an indirect role to play, including the U.S. military, which trains foreign military officers to see the beneficial aspects of a separation of powers including civilian control of the military. Democracy should not trump legitimate security concerns in the U.S.-Egypt relationship but more care and thought needs to be given to how non-democracy policies impact the prospects of political reform. For example, it is important that antiterrorism assistance not be used to stifle, harass, or intimidate legitimate activities of opposition parties or activists seeking to exercise their rights.

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Current interagency communication, while helpful, is not sufficient in its current form. An ad hoc process currently exists through intermittent “deputies’ meetings” between agencies, held by Deputy Assistant Secretaries or their designees to discuss particular policy issues. In addition, meetings chaired by the U.S. Ambassador in Cairo have achieved a measure of coordination between some agencies working in-country. While these meetings should continue, particularly to address local developments and those requiring immediate attention, they must be supplemented by a regular interagency process centered in Washington that involves all bureaucratic stakeholders.

**Monthly meetings of representatives from each agency involved in the bilateral relationship should be held to ensure consistency of U.S. policy implementation.** These meetings should be chaired by the Senior Director for the Middle East at the National Security Council (NSC) and include representation at the Assistant Secretary level from all relevant agencies. Such meetings would review policy implementation and strategy pertaining to the U.S.-Egypt relationship, including democratization efforts. Agency feedback and recommendations would be relayed through the National Security Advisor to the president, whose decisions, in turn, would be communicated via the meeting’s NSC chair. Establishing regular interagency communication and a clear chain of command up to the White House would be crucial for effective policies in support of democracy.

**Policy strategies agreed on at these meetings should include a common set of talking points for communication with the Egyptian government.** A consistent message on the part of high-ranking U.S. officials visiting Cairo will increase policy coherence and effectiveness, including on issues of political reform. Although some may argue that it is not a Pentagon official’s purview or responsibility to discuss political reform with an Egyptian official—leaving that matter to the U.S. Ambassador or other State Department officials—high-ranking Defense Department officials frequently raise such issues with their Iraqi and Afghani counterparts, so delivering such messages would not be out of the ordinary. Moreover, Egyptian officials will see that democratization is not simply the goal of a particular U.S. agency, but is a guiding principle of the U.S. government as a whole.

**The U.S. President should be kept fully apprised of both the interagency meetings and the deliberations of American-Egyptian bilateral diplomacy.** This should include reports on such matters as the status of progress by the Egyptian government on

designated reform issues, in order to inform direct communication between the two heads of state. The president should reinforce U.S. calls for democratization during private phone conversations with his Egyptian counterpart as well as during state visits. Such communication is highly important, as the Egyptian president is the primary decision maker on sensitive issues such as political reform and press freedom. Consistent and persistent messages, delivered in a respectful tone, will impart to the Egyptian president the importance the United States attaches to genuine democratic reform.

### *Multilateral Coordination*

Similarly, there needs to be greater coordination on Egyptian democratization between the United States and the EU. Egypt, like other countries, sometimes tries to play off the EU, or its individual member-states such as France, against the United States. It is not inconceivable that if the Egyptian government sees the U.S. as being too nettlesome, it will then show favor with the Europeans, even to the point of steering economic contracts to them.

**U.S. and EU officials should meet on a regular basis to discuss and formulate coherent policies on Middle East democratization, including important strategic countries like Egypt.** Although EU and U.S. officials hold meetings on a regular basis to discuss the Middle East, discussion is often dominated by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Such meetings should be expanded to address common approaches to political reform in the region, the formulation of joint diplomatic statements on the need for and desired shape of Middle Eastern reform, and to coordinate an incentivized aid program that would support reform efforts with financial assistance.<sup>25</sup> Common criteria should be developed to measure political openness (e.g., the ability to voice dissent and peacefully oppose government policies) and press freedoms. If a country such as Egypt does move ahead with meaningful political reform measures, then it should be praised by both the U.S. and the EU, followed by an immediate disbursement of supplemental funds according to a clearly articulated plan. Diplomats from both the U.S. Embassy and the European Commission should also monitor the situation on the ground and compare notes to ensure that there is no backtracking on reform once such funds are released.

There exist a number of forums where U.S. and EU officials meet on a regular basis to discuss Middle East issues. Outside of foreign minister-level meetings, these forums

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include: the Task Force Group, held at the deputy foreign minister-level; the Senior Group Level Discussions (also called the EU Troika Consultations with the U.S.), which meets three or four times a year, alternating between Brussels and Washington (or by video-conference) and held at the level of Assistant Secretary of State; and the Council Working Group, which is held at the country-director level, such as the head of the Egypt office at the State Department and his/her EU counterpart). To ensure that democratization and appropriate policy responses are discussed and agreed to on a regular basis, meetings held four times a year at the Assistant Secretary of State-level would seem the most appropriate. If a consensus cannot be reached at this level, then outstanding issues should be decided at the foreign minister-level.

Beyond aid, other forms of coordination would be invaluable. The U.S. and the EU should share talking points (as they do on peace process issues) to underscore to Egyptian officials the importance both attach to the issue of political reform. U.S. and EU officials should also pledge not to allow commercial interests to influence their democratization policies toward Middle Eastern countries, and if either side believes the other is weakening on its commitment to political reform in the region, the meeting would be an appropriate venue to bring up this subject. A multilateral effort will increase the legitimacy of democracy promotion, increase the levels of funding involved, and tangibly demonstrate that an international consensus exists in support of the rights of the Egyptian public.

### *The Islamist Question*

The question of how the U.S. should approach the Muslim Brotherhood looms over every discussion about political reform in Egypt. The Brotherhood is the largest opposition party in Egypt. Since the 2005 elections, it has held 20% of the seats in the Egyptian parliament, and it would have more seats if not for widespread irregularities in the last two rounds of voting. Technically, the movement remains illegal in Egypt, but its members have been allowed to run for parliament as “independents” who are nevertheless publicly affiliated with the group. However, Egyptian officials have ensured through new laws and constitutional amendments that it will be virtually impossible for the Brotherhood to field a presidential candidate in 2011. The Egyptian government has also pressured U.S. officials not to meet with Brotherhood members, even though lower-ranking diplomats had met openly with them in the past.

**American officials should establish an open channel of communication with the Brotherhood.** The U.S. cannot credibly claim to be supportive of political pluralism while refusing to engage the main political opposition force in the country. As the Obama administration seeks to engage with a variety of actors perceived to be inimical to U.S. interests, excluding the Brotherhood seems increasingly anomalous and difficult to justify on grounds other than deference to the Egyptian regime. Comparisons with armed Islamist groups like Hamas or Hizbullah do not hold, as the Brotherhood in Egypt is not considered a terrorist organization by the State Department, having renounced violence more than thirty years ago. The ban on meeting with the Brotherhood is more incongruous because the U.S. does meet with nonviolent Islamist groups in other countries such as Iraq, Yemen, and Morocco.<sup>26</sup>

Concerns about the group's position on issues such as the rights of religious minorities and women should not be overlooked, but could more accurately be ascertained and evaluated through direct dialogue. Engagement with the Brotherhood may work to modify their positions, dispel some misconceptions about U.S. policy, and increase the credibility of U.S. calls for reform in Egypt and elsewhere. Brotherhood members of Egypt's parliament have been the most vocal about the need for good governance, accountability, and combating corruption, and strategies for confronting these issues should also be addressed.<sup>27</sup>

As members of the Egyptian parliament, the Brotherhood should be included in parliamentary exchanges with their U.S. counterparts, including meetings on Congressional delegations to Egypt and in programs run through the House Democracy Assistance Commission. Although some Brotherhood members may not wish to participate in such exchanges for ideological or political reasons, U.S. legislators should demonstrate that such programs are open to them when possible. Similarly, the ban on Brotherhood participation in U.S.-funded democracy programs, conferences, and workshops should be lifted. That is not to say that funds should be disbursed directly to the Brotherhood, but many existing democracy and governance programs ostensibly seek to include a diverse range of political actors in Egypt, which is greatly hindered by excluding Brotherhood participation.

## An Integrated Strategy for U.S. Policy

Lessons learned from the experience of previous administrations point to the need for a more consistent and integrated U.S. approach to supporting Egyptian democracy, which can be summarized by several key elements:

**Change the Tone.** Through public rhetoric, demonstrate a break from the policies of the Bush administration, while clearly expressing support for political and civil freedom for all Egyptians. Adopt a modest tone that acknowledges other strategic concerns, without downplaying the importance of true reform. Use public declarations to praise specific positive steps taken by the Egyptian government and express concern regarding any repressive measures, such as the imprisonment of dissident political voices. Avoid personalizing such criticism by expressing concern consistently and evenly for victims of government repression across the ideological spectrum. Reserve the discussion of sensitive issues such as presidential succession and restrictions on political parties for private diplomatic engagement. At the same time, take care to avoid any rhetoric that could be perceived as downplaying the importance of human rights concerns.

**Establish a Strategic Dialogue.** Launch a formal U.S.-Egyptian strategic dialogue as a forum for serious discussions of political reform behind closed doors. Hold four such meetings each year, alternating between Cairo and Washington. On the American side, the strategic dialogue should be led by the State Department and include representatives of all U.S. government agencies involved in the bilateral relationship. Such a representative collection of U.S. agencies, including military officials, will help to reassure Egyptian officials that the United States greatly values the relationship while at the same time underscoring to them that political reform remains a top priority of the entire U.S. government. In this setting, address strategies for removing restrictions on political party activity, for increasing freedom of expression and the press, and for increasing the fairness and legitimacy of Egyptian elections. Stress to the Egyptian government that tangible progress must be reached on these issues, for the sake of Egyptian stability and development, as well as U.S. credibility in the region.

**Use Positive Conditionality to Encourage Reform.** Offer a series of incentives, including a new package of economic aid and enhanced trade benefits, to be granted to the Egyptian government if it meets certain reform benchmarks. In partnership

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with the European Union, establish a mechanism whereby additional economic assistance from the U.S., along with an equivalent amount from the EU, will be provided to Egypt if it meets certain political reform benchmarks, such as reform of the political party law to allow for more open political activity and removal of restrictions on nongovernmental and civil society organizations. Such rewards should be publicized by both the U.S. and the EU as part of a public diplomacy effort to demonstrate to the Egyptian people that the United States and the EU support democratization efforts in their country, while also assuring the Egyptian government that the U.S. and EU will jointly support the government as it takes difficult steps in the reform process.

**Bolster Assistance Programs for Democracy and Governance.** Cutting aid to Egyptian civil society now sends precisely the wrong message; instead, aid should be increased as part of a broader, integrated strategy. Focus particularly on institution building, education programs, and small grant programs for civil society organizations. Expand programs for exchanges between Egyptian and American legislators and judges, and establish similar exchange programs for members of professional syndicates. Care should be taken to ensure that all such programs include a diversity of Egyptian participants, and are not limited to members of the NDP or those most loyal to the regime. Also, expand exchange, education, and training programs for university students and younger generation political activists. In addition, direct funding for local Egyptian civil society organizations should be increased, with a particular emphasis on programs that are not focused exclusively on Cairo and Alexandria.

**Step Up Interagency Coordination.** Prioritizing political reform in Egypt will require enhanced coordination between various bureaucratic stakeholders. In the absence of a consistent message, conveyed from the top down, the Egyptian government will receive mixed signals and be able to play one agency against another. Monthly meetings of representatives from each agency involved in the bilateral relationship should be held to ensure consistency of U.S. policy implementation. These meetings should be chaired by the Senior Director for the Middle East at the National Security Council (NSC) and include representation at the Assistant Secretary level from all relevant agencies. Policy strategies agreed on at these meetings should include a common set of talking points for communication with the Egyptian government. The U.S. president should be kept fully apprised of both the interagency meetings and the deliberations of American-Egyptian bilateral diplomacy.

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**Work with Europe.** U.S. and EU officials should meet on a regular basis to discuss and formulate coherent policies on Middle East democratization, including important strategic countries like Egypt. A common set of governance criteria should be developed, with the goal of better coordinating assistance programs and incentivizing reform. The U.S. and the EU should share talking points to underscore to Egyptian officials the importance both attach to the issue of political reform.

**Engage Directly with Political Opposition Movements.** Demonstrate an increased willingness to meet with a variety of opposition actors within Egypt. This should include existing, legal political parties such as the Ghad Party, the Democratic Front Party, and the Wafd Party, as well as, critically, the Muslim Brotherhood. Channels should also be opened between the U.S. government and leaders of more informal Egyptian political forces such as the Kifaya movement and the April 6 Youth Movement, as well as leaders of labor movements that became increasingly political since 2008. Incorporate opposition members of parliament, including those from the Muslim Brotherhood, into existing parliamentary exchange and training programs. Remove the ban on Muslim Brotherhood members participating in conferences or dialogue sponsored by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) or other State Department and USAID initiatives. Make clear that a willingness to engage in dialogue does not indicate support for one movement over another, but a desire to learn about the groups' views on democracy and political reform and to consistently support democratic processes. Such direct engagement and inclusion will improve U.S. credibility when speaking of reform, give the U.S. a better understanding of the obstacles faced by such groups in order to voice concerns with the government, and allow the U.S. to communicate with Egyptians beyond the NDP-controlled government apparatus.

## Conclusion

If the United States is to effectively support political reform and human rights in Egypt, it must strike a balance. Concerns for Egyptian democracy cannot be ignored, but at the same time, the U.S. must adopt a strategy that is realistic and not overly threatening to its longstanding ally in the region. The U.S. must keep the democratization agenda as a key component of the overall relationship, without prioritizing it to the degree that other strategic interests are neglected. Specific strategies for supporting democracy and human rights must be adopted as an integrated part of the U.S.-Egypt relationship.

Discussions of specific reform measures, because they involve the internal affairs of the country, are inherently sensitive and should often be handled in a closed-door setting. Public declarations of support for Egyptian democracy should be focused on general calls for increased political space and respect for human rights, and consistent objections to regressive steps in this regard. Only the government of Egypt, and most likely the Egyptian president himself, can make real changes given the power structure in the country. However, if the Egyptian government does move ahead with such reforms, they should receive the full support of the United States and the EU, including supplemental financial assistance. By cooperating with and encouraging the government, the West will send the message that it is not out to undermine the Egyptian government. At the same time, the Egyptian people will see that there is international support for moves aimed to bring about more freedom and democracy to their country.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers should increase support for certain democracy programs that have had a positive track record in building civil society from the ground up. In addition, they should expand and improve programs aimed at strengthening institutions in the country that are essential in the operations of a democracy, such as an independent judiciary and a strong and vibrant parliament. The U.S. should also support, as much as feasible, Egyptian professional syndicates, seek to assist civic education in Egypt, and enable more Egyptian students to study at U.S. universities.

All of these policies, if supported in a coherent manner by the entire U.S. government apparatus with consistent political support, will prepare the foundation for democracy

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in Egypt. There will be setbacks along the way, and the process will likely take longer than some democracy activists would like. But if applied properly and consistently, these policies will assist the Egyptian people in reversing the regressive trends of the past few years and beginning the transition to a genuinely democratic Egypt.

## Notes

1. As reported in the article, 'Elections Aren't Democracy,' *Washington Post*, January 19, 2009.
2. See, for example, the findings of the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace, University of Maryland/Zobgy International 2006 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey as well as the Gallup Poll in the Muslim World ([www.gallupworldpoll.com/content/?ci=26539](http://www.gallupworldpoll.com/content/?ci=26539))
3. "Seasons of protest," *Al-Abram Weekly*, January 1-6, 2009.
4. Bright Star is a biennial, joint military exercise in Egypt established following the Camp David accords in 1979. See, e.g. "Star Loses Magnitude," *Al-Abram Weekly*, November 8-14, 2007.
5. GAO, Report to the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, "Security Assistance. State and DOD Need to Assess How Foreign Military Financing Program for Egypt Achieves U.S. Foreign Policy and Security Goals," April 2006, p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 2
7. See Michele Dunne, "The Baby, the Bathwater, and the Freedom Agenda in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2009.
8. As reported in the article, "Elections Aren't Democracy," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2009.
9. President Bush stated in his second inauguration address in 2005: "Democratic reformers facing repression, prison or exile can know: America sees you for who you are: the future leaders of your free country."
10. See Glenn Kessler, "Rice Drops Plans for Visit to Egypt," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2005.

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11. See Secretary Rice, "Remarks at the American University of Cairo," June 20, 2005, ([www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm))
12. Noha Antar, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Success in the Legislative Elections in Egypt 2005: Reasons and Implications," EuroMeSCO Paper, Number 51, October, 2006.
13. *Washington Post*, February 16, 2006.
14. Peter Baker, "Mubarak's Son Met With Cheney, Others. Secret Visit Came After Cairo Unrest," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2006.
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19. Nabil Fahmi, "Obamamania or Obamaphobia?" *Al-Abram Weekly*, January 1-6, 2009.
20. Mona El-Nahas, "Pointless Parties," *Al-Abram Weekly*, January 1-6, 2009.
21. Fred Hiatt, "The Power of the Ballot," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2009.
22. See, for example, Jon B. Alterman, "The Wrong Way to Sway Egypt," *Washington Post*, June 13, 2006, and Ibrahim Hussein, "How to Prod Egypt," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2006.
23. See the editorial, "Ms. Rice's Retreat," *Washington Post*, March 11, 2008.

24. Sarah Wolff, “Constraints on the promotion of the rule of law in Egypt: insights from the 2005 judges’ revolt,” *Democratization*, February 2009.
25. These points are borrowed from Tamara Cofman Wittes and Richard Youngs, “Europe, the United States, and Middle Eastern Democracy: Repairing the Breach,” a Brookings Institution Report, 2009.  
([www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/01\\_middle\\_eastern\\_democracies](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/01_middle_eastern_democracies))
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## About the Author

Gregory L. Aftandilian is currently an independent consultant and writer, having spent over twenty years in government service, most recently as foreign policy adviser to Congressman Chris Van Hollen (2007-2008), after serving as a professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and foreign policy adviser to Senator Paul Sarbanes (2000-2004), and foreign policy fellow to Senator Edward Kennedy (1999). Prior to his positions on Capitol Hill, he worked for thirteen years as a Middle East analyst at the U.S. Department of State, specializing in Egyptian affairs. His other government experiences include analytical work for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Library of Congress.

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