

The Obama-Hillary Team and the Muslim Brotherhood: A Critique

by Alexander Murinson (October 2016)



Despite numerous denials that Obama administration had wide-ranging dealings with the Muslim Brotherhood, it was indeed this administration with Hillary Clinton as its Secretary of the State Department which expanded a network of relationships with the Islamists. Donald Trump, by clearly identifying Radical Islam as America's chief enemy, brings clarity into this debate.

The Islamists' victories in the only two post-Arab Spring elections constitute monumental developments. Although wielding different amounts of power in each country, over the last few months Islamist forces have come to play a crucial, if not dominating, role in the political life of a geographical arch that, with the qualified exceptions of Algeria and Libya, extends from Rabat to Gaza. Moreover, while the situation is still very confused, Islamists seem poised to play a greater role in other Arab countries, whether that is participating in toppling a regime (as it would be the case in Syria) or by demanding concessions

of current rulers (as has increasingly been the case in Jordan).

In the ever-changing environment that is the Arab world of the last five years, it is difficult to predict what will be the political developments of the near future and, similarly, what role Islamist forces will play in each country. But it seems fair to state generally that Islamism, in its gradualist and pragmatic approach embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots worldwide, seems to have been rolled back in such countries as Egypt under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Jordan under King Abdullah, and faces a stiff opposition from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, with the exception of Qatar. Although they played only a marginal role in the Arab uprisings, Islamist movements are likely to be among the main beneficiaries of the Arab Spring, possibly using their political mobilization skills and grassroots legitimacy to gain positions of power in the nascent democracies of the region.

This monumental change has created many concerns among liberals, religious minorities and, more generally, all non-Islamists in the countries where Islamists have won. In addition, Arab states ruled by non-Islamist regimes have expressed concern. The former worry that Islamist ideology—even in its participatory and more moderate version—remains deeply divisive and anti-democratic, often at odds with their values and interests. They have concerns about the sincerity of Islamist parties' commitment to democracy and their views on religious freedom, women's rights and free speech. The latter believe that on foreign policy issues, most of the positions of various Muslim Brotherhood-inspired parties are on a collision course with the policies of established regimes in the region. Moreover they fear a spillover effect through which local Islamist forces will feel emboldened and challenge the countries' stability.

Historic Mistake: Engaging the Muslim Brotherhood

During the emergence of protests against Hosni Mubarak, the Obama Administration hedged its bets and lent diplomatic and rhetorical support to the Egyptian regime. As the protests grew and the regime began to shudder, the Obama Administration began to advocate an "orderly transition" designed to demobilize protestors and preserve the heart of the regime via a handoff to Vice President and intelligence chief Omar Suleiman. When the Tahrir demonstrators made that option moot, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), an unelected conglomeration of military officials, stepped in and assumed control of the

transition. As the SCAF guided the transition process (and protected its own prerogatives), the United States sought to preserve the longstanding security relationship with Egypt's generals.

Early on in the process the Muslim Brotherhood entered the discussion, leading the Republican opposition to hammer the president. Then-presidential candidate Tim Pawlenty indicted Obama for "undermin[ing] allies in Israel" while "trying to appease...the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt." "With bullies," Pawlenty asserted, "might makes right. Strength makes them submit. Get tough on our enemies, not our friends."

While opponents offered platitudes, the Administration was forced to accommodate events on the ground. Official White House statements contained no explicit references to the Muslim Brotherhood, but privately officials did not rule out dealing with the group. According to White House staff, in private discussions Obama noted the possibility of engagement with what the *New York Times* described as "nonsecular parties: diplomatic-speak for the Muslim Brotherhood." However as the SCAF took over the transition and began to set the timeline for elections, the United States receded into the background, only interacting with the Muslim Brotherhood by funding various NGO initiatives aimed at party building and political education that sometimes included the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) members.

In fact, the Administration's first high-level, on the record statement on the Muslim Brotherhood came following a meeting between Secretary Clinton and the Hungarian Prime Minister. Arshad Mohammed from *Reuters* queried the Secretary on the U.S. policy toward engagement with the Brotherhood. "With respect to the Muslim Brotherhood," Clinton responded, "the Obama Administration is continuing the approach of limited contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood that has existed on and off for about five or six years. We believe, given the changing political landscape in Egypt, that it is in the interests of the United States to engage with all parties that are peaceful and committed to nonviolence, that intend to compete for the parliament and the presidency. And we welcome, therefore, dialogue with those Muslim Brotherhood members who wish to talk with us...I think that the importance here is that this is not a new policy, but it is one that we are reengaging in because of the upcoming elections [...]."

Although Clinton attempted to pitch the policy as simply a continuation of the

existing approach to the group, it was undoubtedly a departure. Saad El-Katany, Secretary-General of the Brotherhood's new political party, the FJP, confirmed that "no contacts [with the Americans] have been made with the group or the party."

Despite Clinton's statements, high-level contact between the Brotherhood and senior U.S. officials did not materialize until after Egypt's parliamentary elections. When the initial stages of the staggered elections suggested a significant Brotherhood contingent in parliament, senior officials began to formally seek out members. In early December, John Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Committee Foreign Relations, visited with senior Brotherhood officials in Cairo. In early January 2012, Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey D. Feltman met with FJP officials, followed later in the month by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, the second-ranking official in the State Department (behind Secretary of State Clinton). That same month, the *New York Times* asserted that the meetings were part of "a historic shift" in U.S. foreign policy towards the Islamist group.

Trump's Approach

Assertions that Donald Trump does not practice Realpolitik in his approach to the Middle East are absolutely baseless. He follows in the tradition of a pragmatic and hard-nosed approach to the complexities of Middle East politics. Picking up where a former Republican presidential candidate Tim Pawlenty left off, Donald Trump criticizes the Obama administration's engagement/appeasement of America's Islamist enemies, in the meantime severely undermining trust of our friends in the Middle East: Israel and more status quo political forces represented by President Al-Sisi and King Abdullah.

One of Donald Trump's foreign affairs advisers, Dr. Walid Phares, explained that a Trump administration would seek to form a coalition with moderate partners in the Middle East in order to tackle the Islamic State group, help bring an end to the Syrian civil war and even bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

"But in order to be able to do so in Iraq and Syria you need to have a regional coalition of Arab moderate partners. We have them. There are five Arab armies who we've trained, we've equipped them, who are eager to basically help us at least in the Sunni areas where ISIS is in control,"

Dr. Phares said.

“So Mr. Trump thinks that first of all we need to take care of ISIS. Kurds should be involved, Arab moderates should be involved, we can be involved in certain ways and we avoid entering the civil war,” he continued.

“After that is done there is a whole area in Syria that will be free with moderates, then along with the Russians and the international community, we could go to negotiations between both sides and there would be the discussions over the fate of President Assad.”

This sounds like realpolitik to us.

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