The Working Group on Egypt

January 28, 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to you out of deep concern that your administration may pursue policies towards Egypt, a major U.S. ally in the Middle East, that will exacerbate persistent instability in that country. A failed attempt at democratic transition has given way to intense polarization, frightening repression, and escalating violence. Such instability will make it impossible for Egypt to be a reliable security ally for the United States or peace partner for Israel, and threatens to increase terrorism against American targets and important American interests. If the United States fails to take a clear stance against Egypt’s current democratic reversal, and decides to resume suspended aid programs in the face of growing repression, your policies may reinforce this debilitating dynamic to the detriment of U.S. interests and values. We urge you to instruct Secretary of State Kerry not to certify that Egypt has met congresionally mandated conditions on democracy under current conditions.

The idea that there will be a trade-off between democracy and stability in Egypt is false. A realistic assessment of what is happening in Egypt—a massive crackdown on members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, mounting repression of peaceful critics of the coup, societal polarization and troubling vigilante violence, persistent demonstrations, escalating militant attacks on police and military targets—shows that repressive, security-dominated rule will not produce long-, medium-, or even short-term stability. Especially since the events of 2011, the populace is more mobilized, more involved in politics, and more divided than ever. In these circumstances, pluralistic democratic institutions, and an opportunity for freedom of speech and assembly, will be necessary to allow citizens to struggle peacefully to resolve those divisions through compromise and democratic decision-making.

A wave of prosperity could in theory calm the political situation, at least temporarily, but the immense challenges facing Egypt’s economy make any quick fixes impossible; the restive political environment makes it unlikely that the public will swallow painful economic reforms while their political rights are squelched. Gulf largesse is likely to be squandered through short-term populist economic policies.

In fact, the brutal tactics now regularly used by the Egyptian government against civilians, the suppression of dissent, the crushing not only of the Muslim Brotherhood but of non Islamist political actors, and economic regression are likely to erode the popularity of Egypt’s rulers in short order. The banning of all peaceful dissent will close off space for moderate politics and will produce further repression, more unrest, and great economic damage. All in all, it is a formula for at best a brief honeymoon followed by increasing and long-lasting instability.

The United States repeatedly has missed opportunities to use its influence to press for more openness and for badly needed reforms in Egypt—first under Mubarak, then under the first period
of military rule, then under President Morsi, and now under the current military-backed order. U.S. policy has been far too passive in the face of repeated violations of human rights and democratic norms by successive Egyptian governments, and we are at risk of reaping the consequences. The United States should avoid giving unequivocal backing to the Egyptian military in what is sure to be an escalating cycle of repression and violence that will only add to the already explosive situation in the Middle East.

You will shortly face decisions about whether to resume all U.S. military and economic assistance to Egypt, a total of $1.5 billion annually, which was partially suspended after the July 2013 military coup against President Mohammed Morsi. It is essential that you take a fresh look at U.S. policy towards Egypt and decide to use both diplomacy and assistance to send a clear message about what sort of future the United States wants to encourage for the country, and what sort of actions it cannot support.

In the annual appropriations act passed recently, Congress included new language requiring the administration to certify that Egypt’s government has held a constitutional referendum and other elections, but also that it is "taking steps to support a democratic transition" in order for U.S. aid to continue. Senator Patrick Leahy, the lead author of this legislation, explained that "If the military continues its repressive tactics, arresting democracy activists and does not hold free and fair elections, the certifications will not be possible and U.S. aid will be cut off."

We urge you to instruct Secretary of State Kerry not to certify that Egypt’s government has met the Congressionally-mandated conditions solely, or primarily, on the basis of its holding elections or following other procedural aspects of democracy while it also carries out massive human rights violations with impunity. The hollowness of the recent constitutional referendum was made clear by the government’s blatant disregard of the rights and freedoms the new Constitution purports to protect, notably the rights of freedom of assembly and expression that were crudely denied before and after the vote. The near-certainty that General al-Sissi will run for president makes it even clearer that real political contestation has ended.

Rather, we urge you to take seriously the question of certifying that the Egyptian government is “taking steps to support a democratic transition,” and to tell Egyptian officials that you will certify only if they take the following steps:

- End the broad security and media campaign against those who peacefully oppose the actions of the interim government and the military, release the thousands of opposition group members, supporters, and activists now detained on questionable charges and with disregard for their due-process rights, and allow all citizens not implicated in violence to participate fully in political life

- End the use of live ammunition to disperse protesters, which has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of unarmed demonstrators, and respect basic rights to freedom of peaceful assembly

- Cease repression of other peaceful dissidents and drop investigations and lawsuits launched against youth activists, former members of parliament, journalists, and academics for
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peaceful activity protected by international human rights treaties to which Egypt is a signatory

- Stop media campaigns against the United States and American organizations, which are contributing to an unprecedented level of anti-American sentiment as well as endangering Americans and other foreigners, not only in Egypt but in neighboring countries where Egyptian media are present.

Unless the Egyptian government takes these steps, we recommend that all or most assistance continue to be suspended in order to send a clear message of concern and disapproval about the dangerous course Egypt is on.

The United States may have valid reasons of state interest for sustaining counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation with the Egyptian government. In an environment in which peaceful political activists, academics, and analysts are being hit with specious charges of espionage and terrorism, however, the United States must take extreme care to focus its terrorism and intelligence cooperation with Egypt on real threats to U.S. interests, and make clear to the Egyptian government that it will not endorse or contribute to an all-out war on the regime's political opponents.

The United States cannot control what happens in Egypt, but a consistent U.S. stand for democracy and human rights can influence the political trajectory of this important U.S. ally. Such a strategy will be far more successful over time than subsidizing a brutal crackdown and putting U.S. credibility behind a political arrangement that works against U.S. interests as well as those of Egyptian citizens.

Sincerely,

The Working Group on Egypt

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*This letter reflects the views of the individual signatories; institutional affiliations are listed for the purpose of identification only. A list of Working Group members is available upon request.