

Egypt—The Cradle of Islamism

Tomáš Raděj

One of the most striking things revealed by a thorough examination of Egypt's current political developments must be the meteoric rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, a distinctive movement which is undoubtedly the precursor of many more recent Islamic groupings

Over the past two years no observer of the revolutionary ferment in Arabic countries, sparked off by Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution" at the end of 2010, could have failed to take notice of the fascinating social and political developments in Egypt. What made these developments especially interesting is the fact that they have occurred in the most populous and, in many respects, most significant, country in the Arab world. While Tunisia may have delivered the first surprising explosion of the so-called Arab Spring, it was primarily the vast country of Egypt with its January 2011 revolution that has helped to break the psychological barriers of the Arab crowds. The rapid demise of Egypt's President Mubarak, deposed following a few weeks of unrest as early as in the middle of February 2011, must have amazed and captivated the entire Arab world.

What makes Egypt such a pivotal and significant country? Apart from its obvious key strategic position—encircling the Suez Canal and straddling western Asia and North Africa—there are several other compelling reasons why Egypt plays an exceptional role in the Arab world. For example, Cairo is the seat of al-Azhar, the most prestigious and famous Islamic university and

de facto the oldest educational institution in the Islamic world. Egypt has by far the largest Arab population (nearly 85 million by some estimates) and has produced a great many thinkers, reformers and ideologues whose influence endures to this day. Egypt's culture enjoys worldwide influence and acclaim, and the Egyptian dialect occupies a rather privileged position among various dialects of colloquial Arabic (ironically, this is largely due to the success of Egyptian soap operas, however pathetic they may be). While there are plenty of other examples of Egypt's pervasive influence in the Arab world, the most fascinating is probably the breathtaking saga of the Muslim Brotherhood (hereafter also "the Brotherhood", "Brethren" or "the *ikhwani*"), a movement that originated on Egyptian soil in the interwar period. Egypt's prominent role in the Arab Spring must be seen through the prism of all these factors.

One of the most striking things revealed by a thorough examination of Egypt's current political developments must be the meteoric rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, a distinctive Islamic movement which is undoubtedly the precursor and inspiration of many more recent Islamic groupings. While Hamas in Palestine and

Hezbollah in Lebanon might be the best known examples, the influence of the Egyptian Brethren radiates outwards from the Arabic Peninsula to the Maghreb, Subsaharan Africa, and even the Caucasus as well as southeast Asia.

In the 80 years of its existence the Muslim Brotherhood has developed from a largely ignored and rather inconspicuous social movement in the 1920s and 1930s through its sudden emergence in the 1940s as a powerful mass movement with serious political ambitions that, however, were ruthlessly buried by the Egyptian regime in the 1950s and 1960s in desert jails and through mass raids and executions. Later, in the 1970s, the persecuted movement turned into a tolerated partner to be ignored at the state's peril; this "marriage of convenience" was followed by a period of the 1980s and 1990s during which the Brethren became an important and semi-illegal movement that the Egyptian regime crushed, persecuted, welcomed, respected and tolerated, as it deemed necessary. In the early 21st century the Egyptian elites were still employing the carrot-and-stick method even though the Brethren had unquestionably become a force completely permeating Egyptian society. And what better proof of its prominence than its having become the strongest parliamentary faction with one of their own elected as Egypt's President in July 2012? The question is whether the Brotherhood has gone "through hardships to the stars", as in the Latin saying in the title of this essay.

How It All Began

To understand Egypt's Islamist tradition we must look at the broader picture. As clichéd as it may sound today, when radical Islamic groupings have again found themselves the focus of the world's attention after the devastating terrorist attack of 9/11, it was Osama bin Laden—known to the wider public since the 1998 bomb attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—who came to symbolize the phenomenon of terrorism. However, another person to attract atten-

tion at that point was a close associate of bin Laden's and currently a central al-Qaida figure, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of the notorious Egyptian Islamic Jihad, whose membership and ideas merged with al-Qaida back in the late 1980s in Afghanistan, highlighting not only the Islamic radicals' sophisticated worldwide links but also the key role played by several thousand Egyptians during the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), as well as in various subsequent terrorist activities around the world. Incidentally, former Arab fighters from Afghanistan, the so-called "Afghans" have been responsible for the reactivation of various terrorist cells in the Islamic world since the late 1980s and early 1990s. And it was specifically the Egyptian "Afghans" who were partly responsible for inciting the violent and bloody conflict in Egypt in the 1990s.

Another symbolic figure in Egyptian Islamism is the elderly cleric Omar Abdel-Rahman, known as "the Blind Sheikh", currently serving life imprisonment in an American jail for his involvement in terrorist acts in the US, a country that had granted him political asylum. He is a die-hard radical whose admirers tried, among other things, to blow up New York's World Trade Center (WTC) in 1993; fortunately, they did not succeed although six people were killed by the explosion in the WTC basement and over a thousand were injured. Ironically, it was a compatriot of "the Blind Sheikh" and co-religionist of the first WTC attackers—most of whom hailed from Kuwait, Egypt and Jordan—the Egyptian Mohammad Atta, who was the notorious suicidal pilot of one of the 9/11 airliners that succeeded in destroying the Twin Towers.

It would be no exaggeration to call Egypt the cradle of Islamism, and not only because of everything mentioned earlier. As early as in the 19th and early 20th century the country became the main arena of the struggle for the future shape of Islam. Furthermore, in 1928 the chaotic domestic political atmosphere in Egypt

gave rise to the Muslim Brotherhood, known as *al-iḥwān al-muslimūn* in Arabic. Its enigmatic founder, the schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna, travelled around the country visiting mosques and “his” Brethren soon launched extensive charitable activities, laying the foundations for the organisation’s extraordinary subsequent success. Its socially and ethically minded ideas resonated especially strongly with a people languishing under the unpopular Egyptian monarchy. For hundreds of thousands of Egyptians the first experience of Islamic solidarity was through the Brotherhood-run charitable institutions, such as

It would be no exaggeration to call Egypt the cradle of Islamism, and not only because of everything mentioned earlier. As early as in the 19th and early 20th century the country became the main arena of the struggle for the future shape of Islam.

orphanages, small hospitals, soup kitchens for the poor, and financial aid to impoverished students. Within ten years, due to the effective practical implementation of its social rhetoric, the Muslim Brotherhood is said to have gained up to a million members and adherents. Social aid, of course, went hand in hand with sophisticated religious indoctrination.

Nor should the influence that the Egyptian Brethren began to exert in other countries be underestimated. For instance, as early as in the

1930s the Muslim Brotherhood began to disseminate their ideology among Palestinians and by the time of the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948 as many as 38 Brotherhood cells were operating in Palestine. Following the foundation of the state of Israel, the Egyptian Brethren became very active in the Gaza Strip, an overpopulated area blighted by enormous poverty, while the Jordanian branch of the Brotherhood operated on the West Bank. The Palestinian Gaza branch of the Brotherhood, known as the Islamic Congress, gradually became one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s most successful regional subdivisions (however independent its operations may have been). Toward the end of 1987 the Palestinian Brotherhood spawned Hamas, an organisation that to this day regards as its ideological authority the legendary leader of the Palestinian Brotherhood, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who was killed in an Israeli attack in 2004. Each day provides new evidence of the Brotherhood’s enormous influence in dozens of other (non-) Islamic countries. Nevertheless, we should not make the mistake of seeing the Egyptian Brotherhood as the head of an octopus. Even though all the other “Muslim Brotherhoods” scattered around the world (whatever they may call themselves, as they go by various names) show indelible marks of the “Egyptian franchise,” and however much they are inspired by and beholden to the Egyptian model, they are otherwise completely independent and distinctive, focusing primarily on domestic agendas in their own countries.

A final important point to be made on the first phase of domestic Egyptian Islamism is that al-Banna was shot dead in 1949, most probably by a police agent. During the second phase of its development the movement suffered brutal repression. In 1952 Egyptian army overthrew the weak King Farouk. The country’s new leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, soon outlawed his main ideological adversary—the Muslim Brotherhood—deporting thousands of Brethren to concentration camps in the desert and having dozens executed. By the late 1950s a large number

of Brethren had thus turned into fervent champions of an armed Jihad against the Arab brand of socialism that held sway in their country. However, Nasser kept the Brotherhood on a tight leash well into the 1960s and it wasn't until Nasser's death in 1970 that the government began to lose its grip. A key feature of President Anwar Sadat's rule was a gradual dismantling of social policies, which bred resentment and further impoverished the population, creating an opening for Muslim Brotherhood to shrewdly demonstrate active and "selfless" interest in the plight of the people and to use its charitable activities to curry favor with the masses. At the same time, Sadat's government started to make concessions to the Muslim Brotherhood, emboldening it to assert ever greater influence. Later, in the 1970, as a result of Egypt's increasing rapprochement with Israel and the granting of political exile to the Shah of Iran during the 1979 Iran revolution, Sadat was branded a traitor, provoking the hatred of many ordinary Egyptians and a boycott on the part of many Arab states. The turmoil of the 1970s saw the emergence of a number of more or less violent Islamist groupings that resorted to attempted coups and other tactics such as the kidnapping and killing of the Minister for Religious Affairs. This era was brought to an end in October 1981 by the notorious assassination of Sadat, murdered by the Egyptian army from which he himself had emerged.

Enter general Hosni Mubarak, a man keen to avoid the brutality of Nasser but at the same time aware that Nasser had paid an enormous price for flirting with the Islamists. The pragmatist Mubarak knew full well the widespread frustration among the populace and tried to woo it with, among other things, a controlled effort to raise the profile of Islam in the country's affairs. The 1980s were thus a relatively peaceful period, but things heated up again in the 1990s as members of reactivated or newly-emerging Islamist cells felt it might be worth trying their luck again. While many of the rebels, whom the regime—deliber-

ately—mislabelled "Islamist fundamentalists" were in fact just ordinary peasants incensed by their socio-economic misery, there was no shortage of Egyptians pursuing a clear vision with a purely Islamist agenda. The 1990s were certainly quite tough, the period between 1993 and 1997 particularly abounding in brutal violence, retribution and executions.

The regime responded to the growing violence chiefly by stepping up its brutal repression. Widespread human rights violations became dangerously routine and the regime seemed to confirm the Islamist claims of its godlessness and the "disgusting character" of Egypt's secular leadership. Thousands of real and alleged Islamists were detained without trial and subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment while in detention. Quite a few detainees died in their cells as a result of brutal torture and many people were held in prison for years without trial and any evidence, leaving their families suffering helplessly. However, this period was also characterized by horrific attacks on foreign tourists, culminating in the Luxor massacre of 1997 in which 58 foreigners visiting the Temple of Hatshepsut in the glorious Valley of the Queens were killed.

Throughout the turbulent 1990s the Muslim Brotherhood vigorously disavowed violence and called for peaceful dialogue. Yet Egypt's leadership was apparently not convinced of their new moderate line and tried to prove links between the Brotherhood and the Islamic Group (or Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, the movement led by the "Blind Sheikh") and the Jihadist movement, in order to expose the Brethren's hypocrisy at a time of fierce persecution. Naturally, this wholesale condemnation sometimes had the opposite effect, driving young, hotheaded radicals into the arms of groups pursuing armed resistance against the regime. However, following the Luxor carnage of 1997 the furious Egyptian regime responded with sufficient harshness to damp down the violence almost completely. In this it was aided by considerable

revulsion within Egyptian society, which largely condemned the attacks. A tough police regime continued to reign, legitimized in part by past attacks perpetrated by "Islamist cutthroats" on tourists and the Egyptian police.

Thus Egypt clearly seemed to be headed for some kind of dramatic denouement, but instead of the widely expected appointment of Mubarak's son as the country's leader, a sudden and spontaneous revolution broke out. The exasperation of the poverty-stricken masses, inspired by Tunisia, their disgruntlement with the lack of freedom and the man who has led the country—ineffectively, in their view—for so many years, as well as with the demotivating corruption on the part of the elites, culminated in the Egyptian "Arab Spring". Mubarak, abandoned by his allies, was infamously and surprisingly rapidly deposed, turning from one day to another into a pitiful old man spending the last days of his life in hospital.

What Do the Egyptians Want?

At this point, a number of issues and trends ought to be mentioned that are likely to affect the state of mind and desires of the Egyptian population in the coming years, and thus also to influence the domestic and foreign policy of the Muslim Brotherhood, brought to power in the spring of 2011 by Mubarak's fall. While it is too early to make a fair assessment of how successful the Brethren have been in terms of solving urgent problems, I would like to list at least some of the key domestic trouble spots.

First of all, there is the Egyptian population's current painful issue: General discontent with the standard of living, which has produced a number of ripple effects. The Islamists have always used discontent with general social and economic conditions as one of their most powerful weapons. Islamist movements—their rhetoric appealing to people of all walks of life, from university graduates to illiterate peasants (the so-called fellahs) from the Nile delta—have recruited most of their activists and followers

from among the socially deprived sections of the population. However, the chief breeding ground of social unrest has been the slums of Cairo and the country's south, the backward of Upper Egypt region. Egypt's conservative countryside is blighted by immense poverty and this fact, coupled with traditional puritanic Islam, provides the Islamists with an almost inexhaustible source of new recruits and sympathizers. This is further exacerbated by the increasing urbanization that has driven masses of immigrants from the countryside into urban unemployment and inadequate housing, depriving them of the safety net of the large extended families considered so important and beneficial in Arab societies. In situations like these people tend to rely on Islamic solidarity to offer a helping hand. In Egypt this role has traditionally been played by the Muslim Brethren, who have met the needs of the disgruntled population which felt that Mubarak's government had failed in its social role. The Brotherhood will undoubtedly continue playing the "charitable card", the only question being whether this can be reconciled with their sudden responsibility for governing the country, something the movement has so far (or at least until recently) been unfamiliar with. Egypt's new President, Mohamed Morsi, has not announced any significant economic policies that might improve the living standards of the populace. But let's face it, in a country where a third of the inhabitants is under the age of 15, roughly a third is illiterate, and the population is growing at an astronomical rate (according to Egyptian statisticians the country had 59 million inhabitants in 1996, while ten years later their number had soared to nearly 77 million), it is not so easy to come up with wise policies and life-saving solutions.

Islamists criticized Mubarak's policies for being often at odds with the concept of social solidarity, which is, after all, a key pillar of Islam, given that in the past liberalizing reforms were accompanied by growing unemployment, privatization and, under pressure from the International Monetary

Fund, a streamlining of the government sector and a reduction in the state's responsibility for social services. Now it will be up to the Brotherhood to continue these unpopular policies, at least to some extent, risking sudden disapproval from the masses—as dictated by the inexorable logic of history, which is likely to come to the fore in the years to come. However, it is more than certain that the Brethren will, with some justification, lay the blame on the legacy of the unfortunate thirty years of Mubarak's tyranny. As various unpopular and painful policies are being introduced, the Islamists' involvement in political life might have a positive impact on social reconciliation. However, in the short term not even the Muslim Brotherhood will be able to influence the excessively high birthrate (which will, in some respects, take the wind out of their sails), or the fact that some 95 per cent of Egyptians are reliant on the Nile and inhabit only about five per cent of Egyptian territory, resulting in vast overpopulation of Cairo and the Nile river basin in general. This, in turn, naturally affects other issues, ranging from hygienic conditions in housing to the number of jobs.

Another crucial battle currently concerns the Islamic character of the country. Unfortunately this battle is often dominated—especially in the perception of the Western media—by fierce opponents of secularism. All this is exacerbated by the fact that in 1994 every intervention of the ultra-conservative Muslim al-Azhar University in matters of opinion was officially declared binding and the then State Council, the body supervising the compliance of the law with the constitution, recognized the institution's exclusive authority in any dispute relating to Islamic matters; in 2012 al-Azhar's *de facto* authority was confirmed. Mubarak's past compromises have thus created considerable problems for present-day secular and liberal thought. As the Czech Arabist Miloš Mendel presciently commented in 1997 "...Mubarak's regime is risking too much by trying to buy the fundamentalists' temporary

loyalty, just as Sadat did years ago. By using Islamic rhetoric and symbols in official propaganda and speeches by state officials, the regime is sawing off the branch that it is perched on. Principled secularists point out that it may not be a good idea to stoop to such low pandering... secularists have been wondering if it is really necessary to have the grim sheikhs of al-Azhar appear on television every day, threatening with hellfire any godless fellow citizen whose behavior and dress is not in line with Sharia law."

I believe that recent developments have further weakened the secularists' position. Few will have forgotten the incident that shocked the Egyptian public in 1992: The deadly attack on writer Farak Fawda, a prominent proponent of secularism, who had previously been criticized by al-Azhar for his views and who was stabbed to death by an Islamist radical. His murderer later confessed to have acted on the *fatwa* issued by "the Blind Sheikh". In 1994 the Nobel-winning novelist Nagib Mahfuz, then 82, was stabbed by an Islamic activist in a similar attack on secularism.

What it is even more shocking in the light of the above is that shortly after a Muslim Brotherhood candidate became the country's President, he announced his intention to intercede with the US for the release from prison of Omar Abdel-Rahman, "the Blind Sheikh." While many in Egypt welcomed this announcement with frenzied enthusiasm, for us in the West this move has illustrated an ominous side of the new President's character. Although, who knows, perhaps Morsi is just trying to score political points and ingratiate himself with his public by making promises he has no intentions of keeping? Today's Egypt is awash with puzzles of this kind but, on deeper reflection, both explanations are unfortunate and the second one is only seemingly the lesser evil.

It is obvious that any effort to enforce Islamic law more comprehensively will meet with stubborn resistance on the part of the liberals, and that the struggle for the religious and cultural

soul of Egypt will continue unabated. The way this battle between a traditional and modern world outlook plays out (these two outlooks, as well as categories such as "Islamist" or secularist come, of course, in a whole spectrum of mutually overlapping hues) is likely to be significantly influenced by social and economic factors, which will largely determine public attitudes. If unfavourable socio-economic conditions prevail, it will strengthen the secularists' argument, although if the Brethren succeed in improving Egyptians' economic prospects, their success might silence the secular "quibblers." Quite a few Egyptians are probably convinced that it is not enough to implement Islamic law selectively as at present, and that Egypt ought to take a more Islamic path, which would include imposing restrictions on various TV programs and curbing the "most outrageous" excesses of Egyptian celebrities and Western tourists. On the other hand, many of their secular fellow countrymen dread the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood and believe that the country has not undergone a sufficient, or only a partially satisfactory, degree of secularization, as indeed they fear losing their positions in a historical reversal that would imbue an already strongly religious Egypt with even greater religious fervour.

What Can the World Expect of the New Egypt?

The great remaining unknown is the future position of the Coptic Christian minority. While they are, just like their Muslim compatriots Egypt's Christians, naturally keen on reducing corruption, improving living standards and increasing political freedom, these days they must be on tenterhooks as they follow every move and thought of the ruling elites, including President Morsi. A complete democratization of Egyptian life (an alleged goal of the Brotherhood) is inconceivable without guaranteeing the full rights of the Coptic Christians who comprise nearly 10 per cent of the population. Their rights are frequently violated,

and if Morsi's regime fails to look after the welfare of this minority, it will not augur well for Egypt's political development. Since, in my view, the Brotherhood is fully aware of this danger, it will take great care not to give the West cause for criticism, and that is why, in the near future, the lot of the Coptic Christians is not *likely* to deteriorate significantly.

The Muslim Brotherhood quite certainly does many commendable deeds and I am convinced that many Muslim Brethren (and Sisters) understand and carry out their charitable activities with heartfelt enthusiasm and without any ulterior motives. However, their sincere effort is often exploited for political gain, and that unfortunately reveals the duplicity of Islamic charity. The Brotherhood would never have got to where it is today without its "apolitical" activities, accompanied by patient work with the masses. That is why the present-day Muslim Brotherhood bears some resemblance to the creeping poison of Bolshevism. After all, some factions of the Brotherhood could, with some justification, be described as "Islamо-fascists," who are amenable to playing the democratic game when the going is tough, only to throw off the democratic mask when they reach the zenith of power and embark on a more direct quest for the control of society. My greatest concern, therefore, is that Mubarak's secular autocracy that was *in its own way* enlightened might be replaced by an Islamic autocracy hiding under a democratic veil. It will be extremely instructive to see if the Brethren can pull off an effective Islamization "from above" (i.e. official Islamization with governmental blessing) given that, until now, they have been the world's champions of the so-called Islamization "from below" (i.e. using a variety of means to Islamize the way susceptible sections of the population dress, feel or behave). In the past decades the Brethren used this "creeping" Islamization outside of state structures to pave the way towards achieving their political goals and it will soon become clear what purpose their leading role will serve. However,

the new Egypt has already seen some interesting warning signs of the Muslim Brotherhood's tendency to Islamize the country come what may and without paying heed to any grumbling.

This brings to mind the verdict of an Egyptian court from November 2012, in which seven Egyptians living abroad were given death sentences (!) in Egypt for offending Islam, partly in connection with the film "The Innocence of Muslims" that aroused so many primitive and abhorrent emotions in the Muslim world. The views proclaimed by various Islamists who have shaken off the apathy imposed by Mubarak demonstrate a number of obstacles Egyptian society might face. Shocking statements on issues such as tourists, women, Christians or the Pyramids, have been noisily replayed in the West, and even though the Western press has naturally missed many of these "gems," it is unlikely that Egypt will suddenly decide to give up tourism, or start organizing anti-Christian pogroms. However much Egypt changes and however many trappings of greater and more official devoutness it adopts, the regime will, at the same time, try to project a kind image vis-à-vis minorities whose fate will be closely watched by a suspicious West. The Muslim Brotherhood is famous for its patience and there is no reason to expect the organization to suddenly rush into a brutal and too blatant Islamization. Many enterprising Brethren must feel that time is on their side and that they can, and will, go on influencing the Egyptian masses in a peaceful atmosphere facilitated by the ruling classes.

Egypt's future foreign policy is a further great unknown. Of particular interest is the issue of the country's relations with Israel, given that Egypt was the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with the Jewish state. The future is likely to ring many alarm bells. While the treaties are not being canceled yet, a certain re-evaluation of relations is already under way and it is more than certain that Israel's relations with its southern neighbor will become more complex than they have been. In particular, we can assume that some group-

ings in Egypt will reckon that in spite of international treaties Egypt ought to strengthen its military presence on the Sinai peninsula. What might make this aspiration more complicated is the fact that a certain reinforcement of troops in the Sinai is, in my view, desirable particularly in order to safeguard the safety of tourist resorts, restrain Palestinian radicals and, last but not least, to restrain those elements of the Bedouin population that have shown the strongest tendency to extremism. The devastating and bloody bomb attacks on foreign tourists in the Sinai between 2004 and 2006 were a very dangerous indication that right in the heart of this region a new generation of Egyptian Bedouins was emerging, one that hates the Egyptian regime for a variety of reasons and for whom the presence of strangers in the Sinai is a thorn in their flesh. Writing this in early January 2013, I fear it is only a question of time before another brutal massacre of foreign visitors occurs in Dahab, Sharm el-Sheikh, Taba or Nuweiba. The loosening of Mubarak's grip has already had a devastating impact on the Sinai, as demonstrated by the deadly attacks on Egyptian security forces, while the Sinai itself is increasingly turning into a haunt for Islamic radicals and smugglers, who often peddle commodities deadlier than cigarettes and alcohol.

Furthermore, the Sinai raises the following key question: Will the Iranian regime exploit a certain chaos to build up pro-Iranian networks in the Sinai Peninsula, which on a signal from Iran could be mobilized for immediate action against various targets, for instance, in southern Israel? This possibility is not as far fetched as it might seem at first sight and might actually be quite logical, if Iran believes that an Israeli attack is imminent and ponders where to open another "front" in case it happens. Under this scenario the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah would be an excellent choice, as it would open up a "northern front", outflanking Israel from both sides, even though I am far from convinced that attacks from the Sinai would be a match to the Hezbollah threat

from the north. On the other hand, attacks from the Sinai might prove all the more surprising and effective, as they would take Israel by surprise. In any case, Egypt will have to fight for the hearts and minds of its own Bedouin community—and not only them—in the Sinai.

If it hadn't been for the recent rift between Iran and the Palestinian Hamas, the Iranian regime could also count on the support of Hamas, not just in Gaza but also in the Sinai peninsula. However, alliances have shifted as a result of the civil war in Syria and Hamas is no exception. Hamas found it increasingly difficult to stick to a pro-Assad line, eventually moving its headquarters from Syria to the Persian Gulf (Qatar in particular) and starting to flirt with Egypt as its new protector and understanding ally. From Iran's perspective this sudden shift must have seemed like a huge betrayal or a poisoned dagger, thrust into the back of a regime that had done so much to support Hamas. I believe this suggests that Egypt will not be a particularly strong ally of Iran. While under Mubarak Egypt and Iran had made a point of marginalizing each other, under Morsi they have established diplomatic relations and there have been some friendly verbal exchanges. However, that should not disguise the fact that in the coming years Egypt will be an obvious figurehead of the Sunni world, whereas Iran and Hezbollah will symbolize the Shiite world. And as long as the entire Persian Gulf detests Iran as the Shiite evil, Egypt will be clearly on its side, for pragmatic as well as for ideological reasons.

However, Egypt's foreign policy will also reflect the influence of the US. America will be watching the direction this key Arab ally is taking very closely, even though these days I would hesitate to describe Egypt as an "American ally". The Americans must have faced a huge dilemma in the spring of 2012, trying to decide whether to approve another enormous financial aid package for Egypt, to which the country has been accustomed since the late 1970s, arrogantly expecting it year after year. In any case, the the approval of

1.3 billion dollars of aid in the spring of 2012, and the additional funds Obama's administration was planning to allocate to Egypt in September 2012 (nearly half a billion dollars, later blocked due to resistance within the US) to help the country with its budget problems is highly ironic, given that the US is paying for the upkeep of a country controlled by *ikhwani*. I fully support the position whereby the US should completely cut off the Egyptian leadership from any "financial cream" if Egypt does not behave the way an ally should.

Of course, the US response ought to reflect the unenviable situation of the Egyptian regime, which on the one hand might exhibit quite a few signs of pragmatic thinking but on the other hand also has to respect the "Arab street" which would not tolerate the regime's hobnobbing with Israel. That is why we have to be prepared for contradictory statements and actions, and these contradictions are likely to characterize the entire period when the Muslim Brotherhood is in power.

It remains to be seen how the *ikhwani* will fare in the upcoming parliamentary election that will follow in the wake of the problematic referendum of December 2012, when barely one-fifth of the electorate (!) voted to approve the draft of Egypt's new constitution.



TOMÁŠ RADĚJ
*is an Arabist. He teaches
at Masaryk University in Brno,
and has served as the Czech
Republic's consul in Baghdad.
Photo: Tomáš Raděj*