

Demonstrations in Tahrir Square: Two Years Later, What Has Changed?

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Hearing on “Demonstrations in Tahrir Square: Two Years Later, What Has Changed?”

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify today on developments in Egypt.

All of us were moved to see the Egyptian people overthrow the Mubarak dictatorship in February 2011. There was a moment of hope that Egypt would move toward democracy. The press was free, freedom of assembly was respected, and free elections were immediately planned—and then held. But two years later, the hopes of many of us, and of millions of Egyptians, are dimmed.

Freedom of speech? Listen to this news report:

President Mohammed Morsi’s first 200 days in office have seen more lawsuits filed on charges of “insulting the president” than during the governments of all Egyptian rulers since 1892, a leading rights group said. About 24 lawsuits for insulting Morsi have been filed against journalists and activists since his election in June, the Arab Network for Human Rights said in a report. Under ousted President Hosni Mubarak, four such cases were filed, the group said. Only one case was filed under Anwar Sadat, and five under King Farouk, it said.

<http://www.newsmax.com/MiddleEast/egypt-morsi-insults-lawsuits/2013/01/22/id/472354#ixzz2LSvJysWu>

Freedom of assembly? Here's the wire story:

"The UN's human rights office on [February 19] took Egypt to task over a planned law on public protests, saying it would curb freedoms and breach international rules. "Although freedom of assembly can be subject to certain restrictions, freedom should be considered the rule, and restrictions the exception," Rupert Colville, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told reporters. He said draft legislation approved last week by Egypt's cabinet would undermine "one of the cornerstones of democracy."

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/65143/Egypt/Politics-/UN-rights-watchdog-criticises-Egyptian-protest-law.aspx>

The problem seems to me to be, in part, that the Muslim Brotherhood leaders ruling Egypt does not seek accommodation and compromise. They seek to rule, and to move Egypt in their direction they favor while they can. The chairman of the Egyptian Human Rights Organization recently wrote that:

"As the situation stands, a grim future lays ahead for democratic transformation and human rights in Egypt. There is a legal edifice that fails to furnish solid human rights guarantees and the same type of gross human rights abuses that sparked the revolution are resurfacing with increasing frequency."

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/1395/21/Human-rights-after-the-revolution.aspx>

He added that Egypt's new draft constitution "fails to offer the necessary safeguards for human rights. In fact, the drafters of the constitution avoided the term 'human rights' altogether."

As you know, President Morsi did not win office last June in a landslide; he won 51-48 percent. So nearly half of all Egyptians who voted did not want a Brotherhood government at all. That should have suggested to the Brotherhood's leaders that compromise and coalitions are the healthiest thing for Egypt today, but that does not seem to be their intention.

The Egyptian economy is in a broad decline today, with the value of the Egyptian pound falling, foreign currency reserves falling—indeed down about 10% in January alone and down two-thirds in two years, low rates of foreign investment, little recovery in tourism, widespread unemployment and underemployment, and a desperate need for foreign currency with which to buy increasingly expensive oil and bread. Here is what the Financial Times reported:

"Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, is struggling to buy the staple in the international market because of the impact of a currency crisis.... Grain traders shipping wheat to Egypt said Cairo had cut back on its overseas purchases as the Egyptian pound plunged against the US dollar. The slowdown has depleted the country's grain stocks to unusually low levels, traders added. Cairo on Wednesday said that government inventory levels of wheat, usually at enough to cover six months' worth of consumption, had almost halved to just 101 days. 'They are living hand-to-mouth,' said one Swiss-

based international grain trader.” <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/828043ca-7608-11e2-8eb6-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2LXwnR0t0>

Meanwhile, as you know the IMF keeps having to postpone loan negotiations with Egypt due to the economic and political turmoil there.

One final point before I turn to the aid question. There is another growing problem in Egypt: the lack of law and order, the rising crime rate, and especially the increasing number of assaults on women. There is an epidemic of sexual harassment and rape in Egypt, and women who take to the streets to protest publicly are often themselves subject to yet more abuses. <http://www.meforum.org/3450/egypt-rape-sexual-harassment> As two female journalists based in Cairo, Sophia Jones and Erin Bianco, wrote as long ago as last June, "it is an everyday psychological and sometimes even physical battle. We open our closets in the morning and debate what to wear to lessen the harassment—as if this would help. Even fully veiled women are harassed on Cairo's streets." <http://www.thedailybeast.com/features/world.html> Lest the assessment seem too gloomy, it was confirmed to me by an American official this month.

So what should we do—continue the aid program, change it, or end it?

Our aid will do little good unless there is a change toward political compromise in Cairo. The IMF is right to keep postponing the negotiations over its own loan package. An IMF spokeswoman said that "we are willing to provide financial assistance for an economic program that addresses the current economic and financial challenges, is socially balanced, and has broad ownership so that it can be implemented by the government." <http://news.yahoo.com/doubts-egypt-4-8-billion-imf-loan-193824514--finance.html> What does broad ownership mean? That there must be a political agreement between the Muslim Brotherhood government and other key leaders and parties, because the current *political* crisis will make it impossible to solve the *economic* crisis. They are tightly linked. But so far, Morsi has taken no steps in that direction. His attitude seems to be that he won the election so he gets to rule—period. Unless and until that attitude changes, I would hope that he is not honored by an official visit to Washington. We should be using our influence to press President Morsi to compromise with moderate and secular political and civil-society leaders, so that Egypt can truly address the many problems it faces.

I urge the Subcommittee to look carefully at the timing, conditionality, and composition of our aid. I attach to my testimony a column in the Washington Post by two members of the Working Group on Egypt, of which I am a member, and which I think analyzes the situation we face very well. We run the risk of continuing an old and I think harmful pattern of ignoring what is going on inside Egypt so long as their foreign policy is stable and more or less to our liking. We run the risk of supplying things like F-16s that they do not need to do the security work they really need to do—to protect law and order in Egypt and prevent terrorism in the Sinai. And we run the risk of appearing indifferent to the struggle for human rights in Egypt—indeed that’s what increasing numbers of human rights and democracy activists believe we are doing: ignoring them.

In these two years Egypt has changed profoundly. But our aid program has not changed at all; we seem to be on autopilot. On January 28th we sent four more F-16s, despite the revelations about President Morsi’s anti-Semitic comments, despite the constitutional provisions that threaten the rights of many Egyptians, not

least those who are Christian, Baha'i or anything besides Sunni, and despite the overall human rights situation. Can it be right that we fail to undertake a top-to-bottom review of the aid program—its goals, assumptions, and effects? Can it be right that the trial of 43 NGO workers who our aid program set to work in Egypt is still underway and they are still legally threatened—but aid flows are unaffected?

I urge the Subcommittee and the Congress to undertake such a review during this session, and I sincerely thank you, Madam Chairman, and the Subcommittee for holding this hearing. As important as Egypt is, we cannot control its future trajectory. We are not responsible for the decisions, good and bad, that its rulers make. But we are responsible for our own words, our own policies, and our own aid, and all should be used to promote an Egypt that is more stable and more free. Let's be sure that Egyptians know which side we are on.

Thank you.