

**Testimony of
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Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence**

Al Qaeda's Expansion in Egypt: Implications for U.S. Homeland Security

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you very much for inviting me here today to discuss this important issue. It is rather demoralizing that we are having this conversation today. Exactly three years ago, millions of Egyptians celebrated the resignation of former president Hosni Mubark after thirty years of autocratic rule.

For a moment, some believed that forcing such a strong regime to surrender to the desire of non-violent protestors meant a huge set back to Al Qaeda and other groups with militant ideologies that advocate the use terrorism and violence as the only tool for change.

Events in Egypt, however, continued to unfold. After bringing down former President Mubarak, the first ever democratically elected president in the country's history was brought to office. Exactly a year later, on June 30th 2013, massive protests flooded the streets calling for early presidential elections and triggering a military intervention that ousted the elected president on July 3rd.

These events have ushered in a period of unprecedented use of violence by militant groups (especially in Sinai) as well as by the state.

This is the context in which we are examining our question today.

To address it, I will look at three relevant indicators:

- 1 The potential for political resolution.
- 2 The trends and characteristics of the resort to violence.
- 3 The perceptions of the US role in the events.

First: The potential for political resolution.

The potential for political resolution at the moment is in my assessment negligible. While the position of the Egyptian government is centered around accepting the roadmap declared on July 3rd, the opposition groups led by the Muslim Brotherhood continue to demand the reinstatement of the ousted president. Well known international efforts led by the European Union, the US and some other Arab governments have failed to achieve any rapprochement in these opposing positions.

Meanwhile the security solution continued to gain the upper hand and culminated in the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization on the 25th of December 2013. Currently, the majority of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership is in prison and the ousted president is on trial for a growing list of offences that recently expanded to include espionage. If convicted he faces mandatory capital punishment. Independent figures estimate the total numbers in prison to be thousands from the ranks of the Brotherhood and its sympathizers. The number of civilians killed in confrontations with the security apparatus is estimated to be 2421, as well as 174 from the police, 70 from the military and 11 journalists according to independent Egyptian source "Wikithawra".

The recent wave of arrests of journalists and the lack of response to mounting international pressure further illustrate the security bias and the shrinking influence of the moderate voices within the current government. The security approach has been constantly expanding and reaching political activists that were in opposition to the MB government and supportive of the roadmap. It is also expanding to ordinary forms of political activism.

On the other hand, the protests by the Brotherhood and its "Anti-Coup alliance" continue to totally reject the roadmap. Reinstating the ousted prisoner (president?) remains their position.

The potential for political resolution is further hindered by the unparalleled level of social and political polarization. A "zero-sum" attitude is prevalent among all the main players. A poll conducted by Zogby International in September 2013 revealed that 50% of Egyptians want the Brotherhood completely banned from political life. The few political figures from the supporters of the current

government who called for reconciliation have faced severe backlash by the media that amounted to character assassination.

Second: The trends and characteristics of the resort to violence.

As political avenues continue to close, the trend towards violence -including by Al-Qaeda-style groups- is on a steady rise. Here it is helpful to distinguish between violence emerging out of militant groups in the Sinai Peninsula and the new trend towards violence amongst youth protestors.

Militant presence in Sinai is not new. From 2004 through 2007, a wave of terrorist attacks was carried out against tourist resorts in southern Sinai that killed about 200 people. Violence in Sinai is multifaceted. Some is carried out by local Bedouin groups against the central government in retaliation for marginalization and heavy-handed security practices. Some is linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict and aims to undermine Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. Other violence is linked to extensive organized criminal activities including drug and human trafficking and smuggling of weapons. Finally, most of the violence is the result of Qaeda-style militant groups taking refuge in Sinai because of its topography that defies policing.

After the temporary collapse of the police force on 28 January 2011, violence increased significantly in Sinai as illustrated by the regular attacks on the gas lines transporting gas to Jordan and Israel and police stations.

Since the ousting of president Morsi, a group called the Ansar Beit Al Maqdes Arabic for "Companions of Jerusalem" came to prominence with a constant stream of attacks inside Sinai against military and police targets, which resulted in the death of dozens of policemen and military personnel.

Since November 2013, we should note two emerging trends in the violence by "Companions of Jerusalem" group: they have begun to carry out operations in the densely populated areas of the Nile Delta and Cairo. This included the bombing of the Security Headquarter in Mansoura on December 24th, which led to the designation of the MB as a terrorist group the next day. It also included a number of attempted and successful assassinations of senior police figures, such as the attempted assassination of the Minister of Interior on September 5th.

The other trend is the increased sophistication and capabilities of the group in Sinai. This was clearly illustrated when the group claimed responsibility for

downing a military helicopter in Sinai in late January killing all five crewmembers on board. Based on a video released by the group purporting to show the attack, the militants used a shoulder-fired missile which required serious training and are considered to be more advanced than weapons systems previously seen among militant groups.

Equally significant is the trend towards the use of violence by youth groups that do not fit the typical profile of militant organizations. The Facebook pages of two unknown groups: Walaa' Arabic for "Burn" and "Molotov Movement" claimed responsibility for some recent attacks against police and military assets. "Walaa'" states on its Facebook page that it is a popular movement aiming to resist the oppressive state. The movement also states that it has no political or religious affiliation. These Facebook-formed groups call for burning and destroying the newly rising "repressive state" by targeting police and military vehicles. The burning of police vehicles has become a daily event in the news in Egypt in recent weeks.

Third: The perceptions of the US role in the events.

It seems that the perception of the US is the only issue that unites highly divided Egyptians at this stage. Islamists believe that Washington supported a coup against the elected president, while pro- military Egyptians believe that Washington has a special relationship with the Brotherhood and was instrumental in installing Morsi as president.

The Egyptian public is overwhelmingly negative toward the U.S. and few Egyptians say it is important to have a strong bilateral relationship with Washington. More than half of the public thinks U.S. financial assistance has a negative impact on Egypt.

A poll conducted last summer by Pew Research showed that 81% of Egyptians have expressed an unfavorable opinion about the U.S with only 16% favorable. Negative perceptions of the US have been consistent in recent years. These numbers reflect attitudes that are more negative today than during much of President George W. Bush's time in office.

According to the same poll, few in Egypt find having a good relationship with the U.S. a priority. Only 24% say it is important for Egypt to have a strong partnership with America, while 9% think it is *very* important. Nearly seven-in-ten (69%) say a good bilateral relationship is not very important or not at all important.

Some of the negativity towards the US, to be sure, is the result of conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated accusations that are propagated by sensational media. They include claims such as the “the US wants to divide Egypt” into several states; that “Morsi was an American spy”; and that “the Brotherhood takes its orders directly from Obama” among others.

Conversely, some Islamists retain anger against the US for tolerating the repressive tactics of Mubarak’s regime. Currently, almost all Islamists believe America has abandoned Morsi and “electoral legitimacy” after his July 3 overthrow. Of course, many also still retain the belief that the US is against any form of Islamism by default. They see the recent policy on events in Egypt as proof.

So far this negative perception of the US role has not translated into violence against US interests. The different violent trends that I described today, including Al-Qaeda related groups, have focused so far on "hard" Egyptian targets mostly linked to the security apparatus. There is no doubt however that the current popular mood in Egypt and the lack of genuine political openness is creating an environment less hospitable to the US in the region. It is my assessment that there is no reason to believe at this stage that there is an imminent risk of violence within the US emanating from the current situation in Egypt.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me the opportunity to testify before your committee today. I look forward to answering any questions you or your colleagues may have.