

Position Paper

Egypt's Obstructed Horizon: Regime in Crisis and Fragmented Opposition

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: **Al Jazeera Center for Studies***

*Translated into English by: **AMEC***





Members of the Egyptian opposition, some seen in this image, try to regroup [AlJazeera]

Abstract

Both parties to the Egyptian conflict have depended on the conflict to sustain their existence. As a result, the prospects for reconciliation between the regime and the main opposition force, the Muslim Brotherhood, are very slim. In the short-term, reconciliation appears to be entirely improbable. However, this does not mean that either camp is in a comfortable position. Despite the steadfastness of its street protests for over a year, the popular opposition movement appears to be no closer to displacing the regime than it was in the summer of 2013. For the regime, while there is undoubtedly a strong state apparatus behind Sisi, this has not enabled it to maintain stability nor to solve Egypt's economic dilemmas and resolve the dramatic deterioration in the state's ability to care for its people. Finally, controversy between various groups on the ground and tensions among opposition leaders suggest that the mood on the ground is inclined to move away from further escalation of the protests.

Introduction

The last week of August 2014 was unpleasant for both the Egyptian opposition and Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime. This was not due to the continued arrests of opposition members, nor to the death and life imprisonment of detainees, because such events have become an almost daily occurrence in Egypt. Instead, the problem lies with the opposition alliance's structure and a growing sense of the need for a new strategy to oppose the regime.

On Thursday, 28 August, the Wasat Party, a key force in the opposition to the regime, announced its withdrawal from the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy. Its withdrawal underlined key questions about the opposition's strategy and modus

operandi. On 31 August, just days after his release from prison, former parliamentarian and Morsi supporter, Mohammed al-Omda, announced an initiative for national reconciliation. Omda was a founder of the Alliance and had been detained for more than a year. His call for a return to the democratic path and recognition of the Sisi presidency as a transitional stage sparked widespread controversy about whether the Muslim Brotherhood supported Omda's proposal, even indirectly. On 6 September, a decisive statement by Muslim Brotherhood Secretary-General, Mahmoud Hussein, referred to several key issues. He said:

"The Muslim Brotherhood reiterates its complete commitment to seizing all the rights of the Egyptian people from the usurping military junta. The group remains committed to continuing the January 25 Revolution until victory; to reclaiming its constitutional gains and the democratic path; to retribution for the martyrs, detainees, the wounded and those still missing; and to the goals of the Revolution: bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity. In addition, we remain committed to saving the army and other state institutions from the recklessness of the military junta. The Muslim Brotherhood stresses that it was not, and will never be, a party to any farce that undermines the future of the homeland and the people. It asserts that it has no interest in participating in the intrigue of the suspicious media campaigns that seek to help criminals escape real justice. Moreover, the Brotherhood is not a party to any so-called initiative that does not lead to a comprehensive and just solution to achieve all the goals of the Revolution, and the aspirations of the people of Egypt ... The Muslim Brotherhood affirms that it will continue the escalating revolutionary defiance until victory. It will remain steadfast in its clear stance regarding the peaceful approach of gradual change to which it is committed, and for which it does not accept any alternative".

Thus, there are a number of questions: What is really going on in the relationship between the 3 July coup regime and the opposition forces? Has the opposition reached a moment of crisis? Is it considering abandoning radical opposition in favour of a negotiated solution? Is the regime moving towards reconciliation or does it not need to do so?

From 'Alliance to Support Legitimacy' to 'Revolutionary Council'

The Egyptian opposition front was born spontaneously and without prior planning. The mounting popular discontent at the end of June 2013 led to the emergence of two opposing forces: the first was in Tahrir Square and called for early presidential elections, and the second was in Rabaa al-Adawiyyah Square and called for maintaining the legitimacy of President Mohamed Morsi. It became clear by 2 July 2013 that the country was moving towards a military coup. This motivated various political forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party, the Wasat Party, the Islamic Group,

the Construction and Development Party, the National Party, the Salafi Front, and a number of other political groups and public figures, to mobilise people in Rabaa and declare the formation of the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy. Since its inception, the coalition led the popular movement in opposing the 3 July regime, including Rabaa and Nahda squares sit-ins in August 2013, during the transitional president Adly Mansour's reign, and after Sisi's June 2014 election.

Increasingly however, there is a sense among Egyptian opposition forces that the alliance is no longer able to adequately lead the opposition movement. There are various reasons for this conclusion. First, it does not have an effective wing outside Egypt. Second, it has been unable to expand and embrace all the forces and groups which contributed to the January 2011 revolution, including those who opposed Morsi's rule. Third, the coalition has been unable to develop an effective vision for an Egypt that promotes popular mobilisation against the regime.

To address structural shortcomings and alliance performance, both external and domestic political and opposition figures called for the launch of a new political grouping. The Brussels Statement of 7 May 2014 was released with the support of Muslim Brotherhood leaders such as former minister Yehia Hamid and former MP Gamal Heshmat, as well as leaders of the Wasat Party based abroad, such as Mohammed Mahsoub and Hatem Azzam. Other supporters include the revolution's Tomorrow Party's Ayman Nour, former Shura Council (upper house of parliament) member Tharwat Nafi, and British-based opposition figure Maha Azzam. The Brussels statement included ten principles that aimed at "reclaiming the 25 January Revolution and reclaiming our democracy" by inviting all opposition forces and figures inside and outside the country to unite within a single front, regardless of past disagreements and policy differences. Notably, the statement ignored the call for Morsi's return to the presidency.

The statement was meant to be accompanied by a parallel declaration on behalf of opposition figures in Egypt to support the new approach, but they were unable to meet on the same day. On 24 May 2014, a statement was issued in Cairo and signed by three major opposition figures: former ambassador Ibrahim Yousry, academic and former Morsi adviser Seif el-Din Abdel-Fattah, and poet and political activist Abdel Rahman Youssef. The Cairo statement was drafted in a spirit similar to the Brussels statement, and promised that it would initiate dialogue between various youth groups, which would result in activist youth forming a new political entity.

However, the repressive security conditions on the one hand, and fear and suspicion between the various domestic political forces on the other, impeded support of the Cairo statement. By the end of July, no significant progress had been made from the dialogue meetings hosted by the signatories of the Cairo statement. This contributed to the re-

emergence of the crisis and led opposition figures abroad to try to form a front outside the country. Following somewhat hasty organisation, several opposition figures met in Istanbul on 8 August 2014 to form a framework for exiled opposition members.

The Istanbul meeting involved a broad spectrum of Egyptian opposition figures, encompassing Muslims and Christians, Islamists and liberals, Brothers and non-Brothers. Among them were Walid Sharabi, Gamal Heshmat, and former Brotherhood ministers Amr Daraj and Salah Abdel-Maksoud, as well as Maha Azzam. The meeting formed the Egyptian Revolutionary Council as a framework for the opposition abroad and elected Maha Azzam as its head. The group stressed that the Council was “in support of the popular resistance... We are not an alternative to the popular resistance inside Egypt which we fully support”.

The most problematic aspect of the Istanbul meeting and the council born out of it was that it did not succeed in involving Wasat Party leaders abroad as well as prominent political figures such as Tharwat Nafi and Ayman Nour. Nafi and Nour issued statements confirming they do not have a connection to the Revolutionary Council and protested against the rushed attempt to form the council without a broad consultative mechanism. The formation of the council also raised questions about its relationship with the popular movement in Egypt and with the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy and led to speculation that the council was an attempt to undermine the Brussels and Cairo Statements.

Council supporters claim it is just a new attempt to organise and mobilise the opposition, especially because there is no framework to unify these efforts abroad, and that it is not the end of the road. The council's critics say it has exacerbated the turmoil within opposition circles and widened the gap between opposition political leaders and the popular movement on the ground.

Initiatives and fantasies of reconciliation

Under these circumstances, the Wasat Party, after a poll of its cadres in Egypt, withdrew from the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy, and it is likely the Salafi Party will follow. Wasat's withdrawal was followed by a court decision to release Omda and Muslim Brotherhood leader Helmi al-Jazzar, who some describe as a “moderate” Muslim Brotherhood member. In addition to the Omda reconciliation initiative, rumours spread that Jazzar would unveil another reconciliation initiative, and that the Wasat and Homeland parties' withdrawal from the alliance would pave the way for them to run in the next parliamentary elections, thus implicitly accepting the regime's legitimacy.

The Wasat Party quickly denied that its withdrawal signalled an intention to participate in the elections. Two prominent Wasat leaders in exile, Mohammed Mahsoub and Hatem Azzam, announced that their acceptance of the party's decision did not imply support for it and noted that they were committed to supporting the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy in their personal capacities. Although there is no certainty in Egyptian politics, media sources in Cairo indicated that the party's decision came after promises from the regime to release party leader Abul Ela Madi and his deputy Essam Sultan, who had been detained on flimsy accusations. A few days after the announcement of the Omda initiative, amid expectations that it would elicit a response from the regime, Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab announced that his government would not reconcile with any terrorist groups (a clear reference to the Muslim Brotherhood). In addition to the explicit criticism of Omda and his initiative among opponents, Mahmoud Hussein's statement settled the debate about the Muslim Brotherhood's position regarding the rumours and reconciliation initiatives.

There is no indication that the Sisi regime is heading towards reconciliation. Indeed, the opposite is true. In addition to the large number of people imprisoned, and the unprecedented number of death sentences against arrested Brotherhood leaders and those tried in absentia, the Egyptian judiciary, which is closely allied to the regime, recently raised a case of espionage against Morsi and some of his aides. The charges could lead to the death sentence for the ousted president and a number of his close associates. In the general political framework, the regime did not back down one iota from the law on demonstrations which continues to result in the imprisonment of an increasing number of activists. The regime has also initiated extraordinary security provisions and a repressive siege at Egyptian universities, aimed at identifying and destroying any potential student movements opposed to the regime.

The absence of any reconciliation initiatives from the regime or the Brotherhood, which is the main opposition force, does not mean there is no sense of crisis among the opposition. Indicative of this crisis are the ongoing attempts to build a broad opposition alliance. Another indicator is more relevant to the Egyptian popular movement and the opposition on the street. While the various opposition formations and statements, including the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy, the Brussels and Cairo Statements, the Revolutionary Council, and the statement of the Secretary General of the Muslim Brotherhood, all insist on peaceful opposition and popular mobilisation, other types of questions are being raised in the ranks of active opponents.

One of the most important questions interrogates the usefulness of this traditional peaceful movement for the opposition. Voices have emerged claiming that demonstrations alone are not enough to put pressure on the regime, and efforts to expand the opposition frameworks will bring no outcome. They allege that the so-called

January revolutionaries no longer have the courage or the popular ability to defy the regime, while the regime does not care about popular demonstrations as long as it can kill and arrest activists without accountability. Also, the movement is unlikely to reach the point of imposing civil disobedience. Such convictions have led to a statement by the so-called popular resistance and the emergence of an armed organisation in the area of Helwan. It is unclear who stands behind these two attempts and it is improbable that anything concrete will result from them, but it is interesting that the gradual and discernible change in the popular movement's mood over the past two months has been expressed through the sabotage of roads, telephone networks, and some electricity transmission lines.

The other question is related to the popular movement's goals, and whether it should continue to campaign primarily for the overthrow of the regime and the return of legitimacy, or whether it is also necessary to advocate for the day-to-day demands of people. The emergence of the "hardship" youth movement, which calls for protests against the economic and living conditions imposed by the regime on all Egyptians, was a key impetus for this controversy.

Regime's crisis: decline of supporters and resources

The sense of crisis in opposition ranks does not mean that the regime enjoys a strong position. The regime's crisis at both at the political and financial-economic levels continues to be exacerbated and appears to be insoluble.

The 3 July regime originated from and based its legitimacy on the popular opposition to President Morsi on 30 June 2013. In spite of gross exaggerations regarding the size of that movement, without it the regime would look like just a harsh military coup. However, the problem is that many of the forces and figures that supported the 30 June movement were not willing to see the blatant return of the army to politics, with most of them calling for early presidential elections rather than the overthrow of Morsi by force and the blockage of democratic transformation. The surprise move by the army on 3 July 2013, the series of bloody events in the year thereafter, and Sisi's dash towards the presidency have convinced many forces and personalities to withdraw their support for the regime.

Within one year, only a handful of the original supporters continue to align themselves with the regime, including a few Mubarak-era politicians such as Amr Moussa and former prime minister, Kamal Ganzouri, and several young activists from the Tamarod (Rebel) movement. Political parties which now appear to support the regime, such as the Wafd Party, fear the consequences of opposing the regime rather than endorsing what is happening. Many businessmen who contributed to financing the protests against Morsi

are now subject to explicit threats to their businesses if they do not help fund the regime's broken economic machine. Other forces such as the Strong Egypt Party, the Popular Current, the Revolutionary Socialists and the 6 April movement are clearly allied on the opposition's side.

The groups and personalities that stood with the regime or reluctantly accepted its legitimacy recognise that they face a major challenge in the upcoming parliamentary elections to demonstrate the size of their popular base. They know that their base is small and ineffective, and tried to form broad electoral alliances in the months after Sisi's election to the presidency. To their surprise, these attempts failed, whether led by Amr Moussa, Wafd, or leftist parties.

In fact, the rapid contraction of the regime's political base has led it to rely on the state apparatus, and especially the military, as its major base and the only guarantor of its survival and continuation. The unprecedented sense of solidarity between the president, the army, police, internal security, intelligence services and the judiciary works well to protect the regime and to enforce its repressive and non-democratic nature.

Because the economy is closely related to the fate of the modern state, the continuing deterioration of the country's finances and economy further deepens the regime's crises. Economic indicators reveal the real financial and economic situation of the country, which was one of the main reasons for the protests against the Morsi regime. After more than a year of the 3 July regime, and despite massive assistance to the state's budget from its allies in the Gulf (estimated at between twenty to thirty billion US dollars), the estimated growth of the Egyptian economy during the last fiscal year (July 2013 to July 2014) was less than two per cent. The cash reserves of the Egyptian treasury did not rise above 16 billion dollars. Due to the return of the Qatari and Libyan deposits before the end of the current year, it is projected that cash reserves will fall significantly in the next year. There is no possibility that a significant growth rate increase might occur during the current fiscal year due to the continuing deficit in power supply which has disabled a large number of major industries. Tourism declined by thirty per cent after the coup as compared to the previous year. Further, a World Bank report issued in August 2014 indicated that forty per cent of Egyptians live below the poverty line; this is confirmed by the fact that the official unemployment rate has remained around thirteen per cent.

For the first time, Egypt's total debt exceeds the size of its GNP. According to Egypt's Central Bank, the country's internal debt is between seven hundred billion and one trillion Egyptian pounds (about one hundred and forty billion dollars), while the external debt is around 45 billion dollars.

The financial crisis and economic deterioration is reflected in the overall situation of the country, especially in the services' sector. The unprecedented and almost total countrywide electricity shutdown at the beginning of September is one of the most prominent indicators of the deterioration of basic services. This occurred despite the fact that Egypt's Saudi and Emirati allies had pledged to supply the North African country with free diesel and gas over the past year, and despite cancellation of the electricity subsidy that was borne by the State Treasury.

Is there a way out?

Until now, both parties to the Egyptian conflict, the regime and the opposition, have depended on the conflict to sustain their existence. This means that the prospects for reconciliation between the regime and the main group in the opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, are slim. Indeed, in the short-term, such reconciliation appears to be improbable. However, this does not mean that either the regime or the opposition is in a comfortable position. Despite the steadfastness of its street protests for over a year, the popular opposition movement appears to be no closer to displacing the regime than it was during the 2013 summer.

Despite Sisi's success in capturing the presidency, and the tremendous support he received from his Gulf allies, he has been unable to maintain the political coalition founded for the coup against President Morsi, nor was he able to steer the country out of its financial and economic bottleneck. While there is undoubtedly a strong state apparatus behind the Sisi regime, this has not enabled it to maintain stability nor to solve Egypt's economic dilemmas and resolve the dramatic deterioration in the state's ability to care for its people.

Controversy within grassroots organisations and tensions among the opposition leaders do not suggest that the mood on the ground is headed towards further escalation of the protests. If more youth groups sided with the active resistance approach that tends towards the use of sabotage to destroy the resources of the state, the consequences could be extremely severe. In short, Egypt is currently travelling towards an obstructed horizon on a long, arduous, and very dark road for which there appears to be no end in sight.

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