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Position Paper

Domestic and Foreign Affairs in Morsi's Third Month in Office



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At the end of August 2012, Egypt's first civilian and first post-revolution president, Mohamed Morsi, completed his second month in office. The president, whose assumption of power sparked waves of doubt and ridicule, seems to have settled into his new job quite well after a tough run-off and a narrow electoral victory. In doing so, he has refuted all expectations of his quick fall and has reflected rare political statesmanship and great courage in decision-making. After his four brief trips outside the country, Morsi seems determined to revive Egyptian foreign policy.

Resolving the Conflict of Power

Morsi took office after a series of constitutional measures was adopted by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which ruled the country since the fall of former president Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. SCAF's objective was to reduce and undermine the constitutional powers of the succeeding president. The most notable of these measures was the Constitutional Declaration issued on 17 June 2012 against the backdrop of a controversial verdict issued by the Constitutional Court that dissolved the Egyptian parliament. The declaration granted SCAF legislative powers and gave it the authority to establish a constituent assembly for the drafting of a new constitution in the event that the current assembly was dissolved alongside its power over the affairs of the armed forces. Morsi attempted to get the parliament to reconvene but was attacked by the Constitutional Court and certain judicial departments allied to SCAF. As a result, his attempt failed.

It is no secret that SCAF has acted like a partner to the president. It is also clear that the process of forming a new government under Prime Minister Hisham Qandil (who was appointed on 24 July 2012 by Morsi) did not happen without SCAF's direct intervention. The ambiguity about who exactly the forces that steered the state were resulted in the criticism of Morsi by the media and political parties that were unhappy with having a president from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Just when it seemed that Morsi was attempting to deal with the question of this duality of authority, the country was shocked by a terrorist attack that targeted an army checkpoint on the borders with Gaza and Israel on Sunday, 5 August 2012. The president was not only stunned by the loss of sixteen Egyptian soldiers but also by the fact that none of those soldiers was able to fire a single bullet at the attackers. The following day, despite objections from his guards and Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the Defence Minister, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and Head of SCAF, Morsi visited north Sinai where the attack took place. It should be noted that neither one of his two visits to the location of the attack (on 6 and 10 August) was very comfortable.

During these visits, Tantawi and Chief of Staff Sami Anan accompanied Morsi. Both men acted as if they were the people in charge of the situation and the country and Morsi was merely a high-profile guest. They also did not show a sense of concern that matched the magnitude of the attack. The president detected a certain laxity in the security of the area and observed the negligence of soldiers who were responsible for maintaining the country's overall security. Above all, he felt the depth of the rift between security and military authorities and the residents of Sinai.

Upon returning to Cairo after his first visit, Morsi decided to take the necessary measures to resolve the political situation that he was facing and restore the army's natural and crucial role in safeguarding the country's borders, security and resources.

On 8 August 2012, Morsi announced the first bundle of presidential decrees. These included the dismissals of the Head of the General Intelligence Service, the Commander of the Republican Guard, the Commander of the Presidential Guard, the Director of Cairo Security and the Governor of North Sinai. He also demanded that SCAF dismiss the Commander of the Military Police, Hamdy Badeen. Some of these officials were sacked

because they were considered responsible for the lax security and intelligence operations in Sinai, while others were sent packing because of their involvement with certain circumstances relating to the soldiers' funeral which was to be attended by the president himself. The funeral was dominated by anti-revolutionary and anti-Islamist groups and contained humiliating verbal attacks on the prime minister, former presidential candidate Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, leaders of Al-Nour Party and other figures that became famous during the revolution. The president concluded that there had been plans to insult him as well had he attended the funeral.

Morsi's first package of decrees shocked everyone – the military command, political parties and the public – but public support for him was very encouraging. On 11 August, a new constitutional declaration was prepared. It revoked the declaration issued by SCAF in June and effectively granted the president, in the parliament's absence, legislative and executive powers. The announcement was published the next morning in the state newspaper. Later, another bundle of decisions was issued, appointing Major-General Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi as Minister of Defence and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and Major-General Sidqi Subhi as Chief of Staff. Tantawi and Anan were retired from their posts and appointed as military advisers to the president. The commanders of the navy, air defence forces and the air force – who were more senior than al-Sisi – were relieved of their duties and appointed to civilian posts instead.

In two quick moves, Morsi eliminated all the confusion about Egypt's political status during the transitional period and about who was really ruling the country. In fact, it is fair to say that until a new constitution is drafted and ratified through a referendum, he has more powers than Mubarak did.

Quick Moves on the Foreign Affairs Front

As expected, Morsi's first foreign visit was to Saudi Arabia on 10-11 July 2012. There are many compelling reasons for why Saudi Arabia was Morsi's first destination in the Arab region. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have historical relations that date back to before the creation of the Egyptian republic; these ties were only briefly disturbed during the Nasser era. In addition, the revolution, the overthrow of Mubarak and the assumption of presidency by an Islamist figure were sources of concern for Saudi Arabia; a free and democratic Egyptian state with Islamist leadership could pose a challenge to the credibility of Saudi Arabia's political system. Morsi sought to reassure his traditional Arab partners in Saudi Arabia as well as the millions of Egyptian workers there.

On 11 August 2012, Morsi received the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Al Thani, who had come for a one-day visit. It was rather obvious that the purpose of the short visit, during which the Emir announced the deposit of two billion US dollars into the Central Bank of Egypt to help Egypt's public finances, was to emphasise Qatar's relations with the new regime and leadership. However, the fact that it took place just one day before Morsi's crucial presidential decrees sparked controversy in political circles regarding the depth of the relations between Doha and the new presidency.

Within a few weeks, Morsi was in Mecca again, this time to participate in the emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) called for by the Saudi king. It was expected that the Syrian crisis would top the agenda of the meeting. What was unexpected, however, was that the new president – also a new member of the OIC – would suggest an initiative dealing with the crisis. Although he did not present a detailed project, he suggested the formation of a committee consisting of the four major states that are directly involved in the Syrian crisis – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran – in order to find a solution. The surprise was not the proposal itself, but the inclusion of Iran as a member of the proposed committee.

The logic upon which the proposal was founded is simple, but not uncreative. The initiative would allow Iran to become part of the solution as opposed to being part of the problem. But since the Egyptians had not carried out the necessary diplomatic consultations with the parties concerned prior to launching the initiative, the responses –

especially of Iran and Saudi Arabia – were neither quick nor clear. Perhaps some time is needed and initial talks must be conducted before it becomes clear whether the proposed method of ending the Syrian crisis is to be embraced and implemented.

Morsi's giant leap on the foreign policy front was his double trip (from 27 to 30 August) to China for three days and Tehran for a few hours on his way back. The primary goal of visiting China was economic, thus explaining the large number of Egyptian businesspeople that accompanied him on the journey. The political implications were no mystery either: this was Morsi's first visit outside the Arab world to a major state. Most observers had predicted that his first international visit would be to the United States, but he headed to China instead, perhaps to emphasise that Egypt's new international strategies will be open and diverse, and that Washington should get used to the independent nature of its foreign decisions.

Prompting uproar as soon as it had been announced, Morsi's visit to Tehran was to attend the opening session of the Non-Aligned Movement summit and hand over the coalition presidency to Iran. He delivered a fiery speech in the conference that won Arab and international recognition. After voicing support for the Syrian people and their revolution, he directly attacked the Syrian regime and called on President Bashar al-Assad to step down. In fact, he even likened the struggle of the Syrian people for freedom to that of the Palestinian people. Also, because he was speaking in Tehran, the Syrian regime's key ally, there is no doubt that while his visit may end the long break between the two countries, the new approach towards Iran will not be based on turning a blind eye to any disputable issues or any collisions of interest between the two countries, whether it is the Syrian crisis or any other issue.

New President, New Policy

Certainly, in the first two months of his presidency, Morsi succeeded in restructuring his role and position. It seems like he has an earnest desire to rebuild the state's entire body politic and foreign policies. Connecting the internal to the external, his recent moves reflect his awareness of the importance of working on both fronts simultaneously in order to shape the new regime's legitimacy and legality.

One must, however, be cautious in interpreting Morsi's domestic policies and have conservative expectations for him. His problem was not with the army or its commanders, but rather with the dual authority established by the SCAF measures taken prior to his presidency. Therefore, what the president did to resolve this issue should not be seen as an attempt to weaken the army, which is regarded as the main obstacle preventing the Muslim Brotherhood from taking full control of the government and state. In fact, his aim is to strengthen the power and capacities of the army, which he believes were reduced under Mubarak because of its engagement in politics.

The belief that Morsi's measures aimed to terminate the close links between the military and state administration is a rash one. The overlap between military and state administration affairs, and the involvement of the army in productive economy, trade, and construction have been so deeply and broadly nested that it would require decades to carefully consider the different aspects of this overlap and rebuild the military institutions and the state on new foundations.

What is currently significant is that the armed forces now have new leadership that is aware of the dimensions and implications of the revolution. While the new army command declared its commitment to political legitimacy and embarked on a military reform programme, the president began to fulfil his promises of restructuring the presidency as a multi-spectral institution rather than have it be embodied in a single individual.

On the foreign policy front, one should not overestimate Morsi's small but successful moves. His visits to Saudi Arabia, China and Iran have caused mixed reactions: while some observers interpreted his visit to Saudi Arabia and the decisive position on the

Syrian issue as evidence that Egypt's new regime will not change its policy of alliance to the US and its regional allies, others felt that going to China and making a stop in Iran proved that he will drive Egypt into an anti-US policy camp.

Reality seems to be neutral by design. What Morsi is doing in his early days of presidency is maintain previous alliances while opening up a new list of regional and international choices.

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