Conflict Mediation in the Middle East
Lessons from Egypt as a Mediator and Object of Mediation

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The bon mot that in the Middle East you cannot make war without Egypt (and cannot make peace without Syria) overestimates Cairo’s military capabilities (and Damascus’ diplomatic stature) in the long term. However, the witty remark, attributed to former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, has informed American diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis the Middle East conflict for many decades. This is why U.S. administrations and other international actors – particularly the European Union and, naturally, the Arab League states – have paid considerable attention to Egypt over the past years. In particular, Washington’s attention focused on efforts to maintain close relations with Cairo: hence the intensive attempts conducted by relevant international forces to pacify the present political-social turmoil and tensions in Egypt.

Egypt, for its part, was itself engaged in regional mediation efforts, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Quite recently, notably under the one-year rule of President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, Cairo was involved in formulating a cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas to prevent a likely spill-over into Egypt of tensions originating in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip and turning the Sinai Peninsula into a Jihadist stronghold. Interestingly enough, Egypt’s mediation role in avoiding a regional conflict, particularly in working towards an Israeli-Hamas cease-fire, was rather successful, unlike efforts by external actors from the Middle East and the international arena to mitigate intra-Egyptian tensions.

After briefly developing an analytical approach to mediation, this Policy Brief analyzes two mediation perspectives related to the case of Egypt. This issue will elaborate on the practice of mediation that may explain why Egypt could play an instrumental role in limiting the scope and degree of violence in the Israeli-Hamas confrontation. The analysis is informed by the fact that Cairo is the main driving force behind efforts to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DVs) in the Middle East. Although originally planned to take place in Helsinki in 2012, the conveners (the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the UN Secretary-General), the Facilitator – Ambassador Jaakko Laajava – and the regional states still disagree on the format and agenda of the Helsinki Conference. Egypt’s claim to regional leadership in the disarmament area was underscored in recent years by regional mediation activities, and significantly enhanced its diplomatic clout with regional and international actors. In this respect, it is worrying to see that external efforts to pacify Egypt’s domestic scene during the 2013 crisis have thus far achieved limited success, with the result that the political and social instability of the most populous Arab country has instead developed into a stumbling block on the way to the Helsinki Conference on the establishment of a WMD/DVs Free Zone.

A Framework for Analyzing Mediation Efforts

In order to properly analyze mediation efforts, the term ‘mediation’ must first be

Abstract

In recent years, Egypt has achieved three mediation successes: the unity deal between Fatah and Hamas as well as the Gilat Shalit prisoner exchange in 2011 and the cease-fire agreement between Hamas and Israel in November 2012. These mediation successes stand in stark contrast to the unsuccessful efforts by external actors from the Middle East and the international arena to mitigate the intra-Egyptian tensions in Summer 2013.

This Policy Brief approaches this puzzle by developing a framework for analyzing mediation efforts and assessing the conditions for success in the cases at hand. It argues that the mediation successes analyzed gave Egypt greater diplomatic clout in interactions with regional and international actors. Yet the failed mediation efforts following the crisis of July 2013 and the resulting political, economic, and social instability of the most populous Arab country have rather developed into another stumbling block on the way to the Helsinki Conference on the establishment of a WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East – with a ‘give and take’ attitude at its core.

This Policy Brief is based on the discussions of the Academic Peace Orchestra workshop held in Frankfurt from November 9-11, 2013, with participants from Israel, Iran, Germany, Palestine, United Kingdom, United States, and Yemen. The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) generously supported the working group meeting.
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An earlier POLICY BRIEF on mediation mentions, inter alia, several factors involved in successful mediation: approval, transformation of the context, communication, constructive interpretation of facts, timeliness, and influence. These dimensions are recurring themes in the literature on mediation. The theoretical dilemmas posed by these considerations are the most important factors in the practice of mediation. Since most cases of mediation include at least some of these dimensions, we thus contend that these factors will be conducive to successful mediation. Due to the difficulties in assessing the constructive interpretation of facts from the outside, this POLICY BRIEF limits discussion to the following factors:

• **Approval of the mediator**: Acceptance of the mediator by all parties can derive from manifold considerations. Neutrality, which is often cited as the core quality of an ‘honest broker’, can but need not necessarily be among the motives for accepting a mediator. Conversely, partiality or even pursuing one’s own interests need not preclude such acceptance. It can even be argued that a mediator’s vested interest in the matter at hand is perceived by the parties as a sound basis for getting involved. In any case, the attitude and status of the mediator need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

• **Transformation of the context of the conflict**: This relates to the ability of the mediator to positively influence the context of a conflict situation, for example by enhancing trust and helping foster an atmosphere, which promotes mutual understanding. Transforming the perception of the conflict may also mean that radicalized parties must change their self-perceptions. Helping new identities emerge is a way of de-radicalizing the dispute, and is often a precondition for normalizing the situation. Transforming a conflict by creating a climate of hope and a minimum level of trust is both crucial and extremely challenging.

• **Ability of the mediator to control the channels of communication**: Talks between conflicting parties are rarely directed at the respective counterparts only, but also target diverse audiences whose anticipated or factual response in turn affects the dynamics of direct communication. In order not to let this configuration become counterproductive, the outside world needs to be taken into account and the parties must be prevented from letting problem solving turn into propaganda. Communication is one of the most important functions of the mediator.

• **Timeliness**: This aspect captures the importance of timing in successful mediation. An early intervention may prolong the conflict and a late response may also be deadly. The timeliness of mediation is impossible to judge at the time of action, and can only be proven in retrospect.

• **Considerable influence over the parties**: This factor refers to the degree of control a mediator wields over the parties to a given conflict. However, there is no way of precisely determining how power...
translates into influence. Two cases can illustrate this point: in the 1978 Camp David I Accords, the powerful go-between of Jimmy Carter can be identified as a significant contribution to conflict resolution. The similar format of the Camp David II Conference in 2000 was not enough to bridge the differences between the parties. One could argue that in the latter case Bill Clinton was approaching the end of his second term and therefore was no longer considered powerful. Still, one might also argue that he was not able to derive influence from his power resources. A counter-intuitive case of a less powerful actor’s successful mediation is the former U.S. Senator George Mitchell’s role in helping bring about the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ in Northern Ireland.4

Two additional points should be emphasized. First, these factors ought not to be used in a mechanical way. We are not arguing that each one of them is indispensable in that the absence of one would be a recipe for failure. Secondly, we look at mediation as processing a complex configuration of issues and actors in space and time. Neither is it possible to precisely assess the impact of each factor in a given case, nor to determine beforehand whether their interplay bodes favorably or unfavorably to the outcome of the mediation. As mentioned above, assessment must always be made on a case-by-case basis.

**Egypt and Israel: Time-tested Channels of Communication as a Source of Egypt’s Mediation Capacity**

Israel and Egypt have gone to war against each other several times (1948, 1967, and 1973), but in 1979, following intense negotiations held under American auspices, both governments signed a historic Peace Treaty. Egypt regained the Sinai Peninsula, which had been occupied by Israel since the Six Day War of 1967, and for Israel, peace with Egypt considerably reduced the likelihood of war against a unified Arab front.

The outcome of the U.S. mediation between Egypt and Israel in this case demonstrates that neutrality was not a prerequisite for success. On the contrary, it might be argued that the U.S.-Israeli strategic partnership and the pronounced interest of the United States in advancing Israeli security contributed to Israel’s willingness to relinquish captured territory. As for Egypt, by having pursued its national interest without consulting the leaders of the Arab states that had fought in the 1967 War, let alone obtaining their consent to Egypt’s untying the package of Arab grievances against the Israeli occupying power, it inadvertently lost its pivotal role in inter-Arab affairs, which it had been enjoying ever since the foundation of the League of Arab States (LAS) in 1945. Egypt experienced a decade of marginalization in the Arab world. Yet, despite its temporary isolation, the Peace Accord with Israel did turn the country into the cornerstone of Washington’s efforts to advance its regional strategic interests: partnership with Israel and working relations in the Arab world. This by-product, whether or not it was foreseen by any of the three actors, makes the case in question a rare example of a trilateral win-win-win mediation.

After having restored membership in the Arab League in 1989, Egypt acquired a center-stage position in the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process, which
was heralded in the opening speeches of the Madrid Conference in October 1991 as beginning a new chapter in the modern history of the conflict-ridden region. In the Madrid talks, Egypt's diplomacy focused on the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group, making an effort to represent its agenda as the Arab stance in dealing with the alleged Israeli nuclear capability.\(^1\)

Relations between Israel and Egypt have ebbed and flowed, with fluctuating levels of acceptance and animosity, although there have also been persistent differences on issues such as the Palestinian problem and arms control in the Middle East. During the process of the ACRS talks, Washington faced great difficulties in trying to reconcile the apparently incompatible approaches of Israel and Egypt. The opposing parties fundamentally disagreed on the issue of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Middle East, mainly concerning in what order nuclear and conventional arms control measures should take place, and the role of confidence-building measures (CBMs). Having just regained its pivotal role in inter-Arab affairs by asserting leadership in the nuclear issue, Egypt could not be persuaded to make a change in position. The U.S. could neither control the channels of communication nor did they succeed in translating power into influence.

Despite the eventual failure of the ACRS talks, relations between Israel and Egypt remained a reliable parameter of regional affairs. They were more or less unaffected by dramatic developments such as the Second Intifada and the Arab Spring. Despite all disagreement, the lines of communication have always remained open between Israel and Egypt, particularly with regard to their security establishments. Over the years, strategic imperatives that had initially motivated the former enemies to sign the Peace Treaty continue to be in place. Thus, the problematic yet solid relations have always remained open between Israel and Egypt, particularly with regard to security issues, government spokespersons. Yet, unexpectedly, security communication between Israel and Egypt have been put to a test from time to time, shared interests, especially with regard to security issues, govern the bilateral relations.

In August 2011, Israeli-Egyptian relations faced a direct threat. Terrorists who presumably tunneled their way from the Gaza Strip into Sinai attacked Israeli civilians and soldiers at the Israeli-Egyptian border. When the Israel Defense Forces moved in, Egyptian soldiers were killed in the ensuing clash, which sparked harsh criticism against both Israel and the Peace Treaty by Morsi government spokespersons. Yet, unexpectedly, security communication between Israel and Egypt was maintained, reflecting a shared awareness of the dangers emanating from Cairo's loss of control over Sinai, where Jihadist elements, who built on frustration and alienation among the Bedouin residents of Sinai following years of neglect on the part of Cairo, mobilized support for their presence there and their activities.

In November 2012, Hamas in the Gaza Strip intensified the rocket fire against Israeli targets and Israel resorted to a massive military operation code-named ‘Operation Pillars of Defense’. Egypt – governed by President Morsi at the time – carefully limited its reaction to avoid letting hostilities in the Gaza sphere complicate security coordination with Israel. After days of negotiations on November 21 the Egyptian government brokered understanding on a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. This diplomatic move was particularly motivated by concern over the deteriorating security situation in Sinai and allleged cross-border connections between Hamas and unauthorized free-wheeling Jihadist factions operating there, as well as by the potential spill-over of radical activism inspired by Hamas and more extreme Islamist factions into Egypt itself.

The crackdown by the Egyptian army against Jihadist forces in Sinai intensified following the July 2013 overthrow of the Morsi government, and brought a provisional military council to power. Operations focused on closing the tunnels between Sinai and Gaza through which Hamas and other factions smuggled “everything, from subsidized Egyptian products, to people and arms. The weapons were chiefly smuggled in from Sudan,”\(^7\) and since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, also from a disintegrating Libya. From time to time according to developments on the ground, Israel, for its part, relaxed limitations stipulated in the Military Appendix to the Peace Treaty on the scope of manpower and permitted activity by the Egyptian army in Sinai in order to facilitate the Egyptian army's efforts to curb terrorist and criminal activities in the area.

These three examples show that despite the atmosphere of cool political and diplomatic relations, Israel and Egypt have managed to deal with emerging security challenges without jeopardizing the foundations of the Peace Accord. Their coordinated handling of threats stemming from the Gaza Strip and the growing chaos in Sinai are clear testimony to the overlap in their security interests and the firmness and effectiveness of their channels of communication.

### Egypt as a Mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian Arena

Arguably, it was the following mix – reservation in the public sphere, which made Cairo appear able to act as an honest broker, and excellent relations between the Egyptian and the Israeli military, which created the capacity to exert influence – that generated favorable conditions for the country to act as a successful mediator between conflicting parties in its neighborhood. Three instances of Egyptian mediation illustrate this point.

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\(^7\) This example illustrates the role of mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Egyptian government took several initiatives to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas in 2012. The Egyptian government's mediation efforts were based on its historical role as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict and its desire to maintain stability in the region. The Egyptian government's approach to mediation was characterized by its continued efforts to promote negotiations between Israel and Hamas, despite the obstacles presented by the political and security challenges in the region. The Egyptian government's mediation efforts were seen as a way to reduce the intensity of the conflict and to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The success of the Egyptian government's mediation efforts was seen as a positive development in the region, and it was hoped that the outcome of the negotiations would lead to a lasting peace between Israel and Hamas. However, the outcome of the negotiations was not clear at the time of this brief, and it was uncertain whether the Egyptian government's mediation efforts would lead to a lasting peace. The example of the Egyptian government's mediation efforts in 2012 highlights the challenges faced by mediators in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the importance of continued efforts to promote negotiations and to reduce the intensity of the conflict.
1) Mediating the 2011 Unity Deal between Fatah and Hamas

Egypt mediated between the Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas, whose infighting, referred to as a “conflict of brothers,” was widely seen as weakening the Palestinian cause. In its efforts to help the parties mend the rift, Egypt consistently acted as a caretaker of interests transcending partisanship in the inner-Palestinian conflict, while at the same time reassuming its traditional leadership role among the Arab states. In fact, at a time when the old Egyptian leadership, under the rule of President Hosni Mubarak, still controlled the domestic and foreign policy agenda, Egypt, on behalf of the Arab League, had drafted a unity proposal as part of its policy agenda, Egypt, on behalf of the Arab League, had drafted a unity proposal as part of its policy agenda, Egypt, on behalf of the Arab League, had drafted a unity proposal as part of its policy agenda. However, these talks failed to yield immediate results in the years following the original initiative.

While Cairo has historically been seen as a relatively credible representative and guardian of Palestinian interests, Egypt’s mediation efforts remained unsuccessful because Cairo lacked the general approval of Hamas. At that time, Cairo did not recognize the de facto Gaza government and as a result, Egypt, which most Palestinians viewed as an honest broker, came to be seen as favoring the Palestinian Authority. This has only changed since the Egyptian uprisings brought to power a new government, which has taken a more balanced approach toward the two Palestinian factions. Under the tutelage of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the government even fostered dialogue between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas during the summer and fall of 2011, in order to improve its standing with the Gaza government as well as promote Palestinian unity.

By taking this more balanced approach, Egypt was viewed in a more favorable light and Hamas was willing to cooperate. On account of Cairo’s efforts to end the rift, on May 4, 2011 Hamas and Fatah concluded an agreement that was to pave the way for a joint interim government ahead of national elections the following year. Significantly, the signing ceremony took place inside the intelligence headquarters in Egypt’s capital. Arguably it was the ouster of President Mubarak that enabled the SCAF to temporarily ignore the protests by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who condemned the unity deal as a blow to the peace process and a victory for terrorism.

In these specific circumstances, the case in question confirms the premise that having considerable influence over involved parties is also an important ingredient of successful mediation. The SCAF felt strong and independent enough not to let Israel’s principled rejection of the unity agreement interfere with Egypt’s desire for Hamas and Fatah to end their rift, and by doing so, ‘pacifying’ its potentially unruly immediate neighbor in Gaza. Ignoring the Egyptian offer to mediate between the rivals would arguably have come at a price neither Palestinian faction could afford to disregard. The approach taken in Egyptian mediation efforts transformed the inner-Palestinian conflict from a battle to be won into a problem to be solved, and it could even be argued that Egypt-led mediation paved the way for the Palestinian unity government announced in June 2014.

2) Mediating the 2011 Prisoner Exchange between Israel and Hamas

In the second case of mediation by Egypt, the SCAF had to directly coordinate its efforts with the Israeli security establishment. In October 2011, the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who had been captured on June 25, 2006 on Israeli territory and taken across the border to Gaza by members of the Gaza-based Popular Resistance Committees, was released in exchange for 1,027 mainly Palestinian inmates of Israeli prisons, many of whom were serving life sentences on account of involvement in deadly attacks on Israeli citizens in so-called resistance or terrorist operations – depending on the beholder’s perspective.

Secret channels of communication between Hamas and the Israeli government had already been established six days after the abduction of Shalit by U.S.-born Israeli activist, founder, and former Co-Chairman of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCR) Gershon Baskin, as well as by Gerhard Conrad, a senior member of the German Federal Intelligence Service. After a couple of days, Egyptian intelligence took over, and by the end of December 2006 the Egyptians presented the agreed formula for a prisoner exchange – the basis for the agreement reached five years later. While the backchannel communication between Hamas and Israeli officials via Baskin and Conrad continued, it was not until August 2011 that Egyptian-moderated negotiations began to determine the list of names of the prisoners to be released. The deal was finally brokered by German and

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Egyptian mediators and signed in Cairo on October 11, 2011.

In all stages of the mediation process Egypt enjoyed the approval of the parties involved – although it was clearly serving its own interest: the Shalit prisoner exchange provided an opportunity to demonstrate to the Israelis (and Americans) as well as the Palestinians that the military government which replaced President Hosni Mubarak could play a responsible role in the Middle East. Hamas, for its part, had already accepted Cairo as a mediator in the previous negotiations on Palestinian unity. Although the turmoil around the ouster of President Mubarak evoked some skepticism in Israel on the trustworthiness of Egypt, the time-tested military cooperation made it possible for Cairo to mediate the Shalit deal.

Egypt’s influence on the two parties is difficult to assess in this context. Rather than pushing the two sides towards agreement, Cairo’s efforts made it possible to achieve the desired results without transforming the core conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in general or between Israel and Hamas in particular. Attempting to widen the agenda and include more ambitious goals would arguably have been a recipe for failure. The Israeli government, under pressure from a well-orchestrated campaign led by Gilad Shalit’s parents, was able to ‘bring him home’ – Shalit was the first captured Israeli soldier to be released alive in 26 years – and was willing to pay a price never before paid for a single soldier. And Hamas could celebrate a political victory, not so much over Israel but vis-à-vis Mahmoud Abbas in his capacity as Palestinian President.

3) Mediating the November 2012 Cease-fire Agreement between Israel and Hamas

While previous Egyptian mediation efforts occurred during the interim period between President Mubarak’s ouster and the inauguration of President Mohammed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood, the third instance of mediation took place during Morsi’s reign. In this period, the Muslim Brotherhood government saw a significant rapprochement between Hamas and Egypt – certainly compared to the suspicion and even hostility (also because of Hamas’ links to Tehran) that characterized relations between Hamas and the Hosni Mubarak regime. Hamas’s sense of self-assurance and resulting relaxed control of Gaza militant activities at that time was demonstrated in November 2012 by a surge in rocket fire against Israeli targets; on November 14, 2012, Israel resorted to a massive military operation code-named ‘Pillar of Defense’. The warring parties blamed each other for the outbreak of hostilities: the Palestinians accused the Israeli army of attacks on civilians in the days leading up to the operation, citing further grievances such as the blockade of the Gaza Strip and the occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as reasons for rocket attacks. Israel’s government likewise presented the operation as a response to Palestinian groups launching over 100 rockets at Israel over a 24-hour period and also cited further aggression such as Gaza militants attacking an Israeli military patrol jeep within Israeli borders and a tunnel explosion caused by a homemade bomb near Israeli soldiers on the Israeli side of the fence.

The two warring parties, Israel and Hamas, refused to communicate directly. Instead, negotiations were conducted through intermediaries. Although a large number of participants, including officials from Turkey and Qatar, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, took part in the talks to resolve the conflict in Gaza, the principal players in negotiating the cease-fire were officials from Egypt. Cairo again controlled communication between Hamas leaders and Israeli and American officials who do not speak directly with leaders from Hamas, which they have labeled a terrorist organization. In order to guarantee approval for the mediation process, Egypt again walked a fine line between its sympathies for Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the need to preserve ties with Israel and Washington, its main aid donor. Thus, due to these favorable circumstances, which for a fleeting moment provided President Morsi with the power to exert influence, Egypt was able to announce a cease-fire on November 21, 2012. Morsi himself was able to reap international praise for his constructive role in the cease-fire negotiations.

Interplay of Approval, Transformation, Communication, Timing, and Influence: Turning Weakness into Strength

The responsibility of being the mediator in a conflict, and putting one’s reputation at stake, itself creates incentives to find a solution. As a self-proclaimed leader of the Arab
world, Egypt sought this role and reaped its benefits. Especially Morsi received numerous compliments from key players in the international arena, and was generally acknowledged as the one who stopped the decline of his country’s diplomatic stature. In addition to reputation incentives, it is also clear that Egypt has its own interest in the issues at hand, namely the importance of secure and peaceful borders with the Gaza Strip, and does not want to endanger financial and military aid it receives from the United States.

While under the rule of President Morsi, Egypt in its role as mediator benefited all the more from a higher level of approval by Hamas without any discernible loss of credibility vis-à-vis Israel. In the field of foreign policy, Morsi was able to correct old biases without creating new ones. This was not necessarily to be expected. His election had led Palestinian Islamists to hope for a more Hamas-friendly foreign policy. Without doubt, Morsi was more sympathetic towards the cause of the Palestinians and had closer ties with Hamas than previous Egyptian rulers – the prerequisite for facilitating communication between Hamas leaders and the Israeli government. This stood in contrast to Mubarak, who feared that by aiding Hamas he would also help the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, by the end of August 2007, when the Israeli government, in the face of continued Qassam rocket attacks from Gaza, was contemplating punitive measures in the Gaza Strip, Mubarak refused to initiate negotiations between Israel and Hamas, despite both parties asking him to do so.

Notwithstanding Hamas expecting Egypt to adopt a distinctly new policy vis-à-vis the situation in Gaza, Morsi was able to reassure considerable Israeli concerns. He basically continued Mubarak’s policy of a ‘light blockade’, not allowing complete freedom of movement and supplies as requested by Hamas. As said, following the attack on the Egyptian border control in August 2012, Morsi’s government launched a military campaign against Sinai insurgents, closed down tunnels and restricted the opening hours of legal border crossings. These actions were meant to indicate to Israel that Egypt shared its security concerns and continued to be a reliable partner in security matters even under the new Muslim Brotherhood-led government. Arguably, this was a vital factor in Morsi’s success in securing the truce between Israel and Hamas in November 2012.

Taken together, the three mediation cases provide ample evidence that in order to enjoy the parties’ approval, mediators need not neglect their own interests and concerns, and do not necessarily risk their approval if they are not equitable when considering the interests of the parties. Realistically assessing the limits of parties to reach compromise can be an asset, too, even if it implies disappointing high expectations, which in hindsight turned out to have been too high. This conclusion also applies to the aspect of transforming conflict between opponents. While it is imaginable that the 2011 unity agreement between Hamas and Fatah marked the beginning of continued rapprochement between the Palestinian factions, that eventually culminated in the unity government of 2014, Cairo’s mediation efforts in the other two cases, which focused on a limited agenda instead of loading it with more ambitious goals regarding conflict resolution, made it possible to achieve the desired results.

As for the other ingredients of successful mediation, Egypt’s capacity for influence under Morsi was limited enough not to disturb the Israelis, but sufficient to be credible in the eyes of Hamas. The ‘soft coup’ of August 12, 2012, when Morsi changed the military command, did not give him complete freedom in foreign policy. The military, at the very least, maintained veto power and its loss of power should rather be understood as generational change. This meant that U.S. military aid continued to maintain Egypt’s military capacity but, at the same time, restrict its use (against Israel). In addition, Morsi clearly prioritized domestic issues, such as transport, waste management, and staple subsidies over foreign policy issues, although with no notable success in improving the country’s civil infrastructure. The terrorist attack on the Egyptian control post at the Rafah border in August 2012 especially showed that a pro-Hamas policy would result in severe backlash in the domestic sphere. Considering the dire state of the Egyptian economy, which depends heavily on external funding, it is quite probable that Morsi had only little leverage to induce Hamas to accept a mediated solution based on economic incentives. It follows that Egypt’s capacities were rather limited both in providing incentives and in obliging parties to the conflict to honor agreements reached during mediation. This was demonstrated by recurrent, though sporadic, continuation of rocket attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip, and repeated Israeli air strikes against the Gaza Strip after the cease-fire of November 2012.

The Limits of Third-party Mediation in Egypt’s 2013 Domestic Crisis

On July 3, 2013, after mass demonstrations organized by the Tamarod (‘rebel’) movement against the one-year rule of freely elected Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, Egypt’s armed forces deposed and arrested Morsi, suspended the constitution, shut down Muslim Brotherhood television stations, and began arresting hundreds of the movement’s leaders. The ouster of President Morsi was preceded by a standoff in Egypt’s political life that was mirrored by the situation in parliament. The majority of its two chambers were Islamic in their orientation, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist parties, while the liberal and secular parties were a minority. As for the public, within six months the newly elected president had antagonized the non-Muslim population as well as the judiciary, intellectuals, and the military. In the following days, many Morsi supporters were killed or wounded by army fire in street protests. Amid the ensuing confusion, several external Egyptian partners reacted in two ways: some, wary of Islamists, rushed to overtly support the new, interim, military-backed government. From the start, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by Saudi Arabia were very forthcoming in demonstrating their political and financial support of the new regime, sending Cairo some $12 billion in aid. Others, like the European Union, the United States, and the African Union (AU), which recognized the new regime only as a de facto new authority, launched third-party mediation efforts to help resolve the crisis, lower the tension, and enable a stable and inclusive government to lead the country.

The European Union

The EU was the first to become involved in mediation efforts between the new military-backed government and Islamist opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood. This was the result of firmly established ties. Already in July 2012, High Representative Catherine Ashton had met with President Morsi in Cairo, and in September 2012, Brussels became one of the few foreign capitals visited by the Egyptian leader. In November 2012 the EU pledged a
The Role of Religion in Egypt’s Political Transformation – Defying Mediation?

The role of religion in Egypt’s political life has always entailed several dimensions, the divide between Copts and Muslims being only one among many. There is the line of conflict between civil forces and Islamist actors that was powerful under Mubarak, but also during the post-Mubarak transformation period. Focusing on the question of relations between Muslims and Copts in Egypt has some general issues related to it:

- For the Coptic population, with estimates ranging between 10 to 15 percent of Egypt’s population, 95 percent of them being members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, a first recurrent issue relates to Egypt’s national identity being controversially defined as Egyptian, Arabic or Islamic. While national historiography increasingly focused on Islamic aspects, reactions among the Copts ranged from moderate attempts to strengthen the Coptic heritage to more radical approaches excluding Islam from Egypt’s identity.

- Second, while Islam has been Egypt’s state religion since 1923, the institutional relation between the state and the Coptic Orthodox Church was never constitutionally regulated, leaving freedom for the church to govern internal affairs. Personal status law, for example family law, was left to the religious communities – yet the Islamic Sharia always outweighed the Coptic Church law in conflicting issues such as cases of conversion and inter-religious marriages.

Against this backdrop, the Coptic Orthodox Church increasingly became a quasi-corporatist organization that served as the representative of Coptic needs vis-à-vis the state, forestalling any other form of Coptic political activism. An increasingly pragmatist approach of the Coptic Church in dealing with the Mubarak regime was based on the perception of the autocratic regime as being the lesser evil compared to ‘the Islamist threat’ constantly warned about by state media. At the same time, state authorities often withheld permission for building and repairing churches, a testimony to discrimination in daily life. Inter-religious tensions, recurrently leading to local violent clashes, were repeatedly used as a divide-and-conquer strategy by Egyptian rulers. Yet, victimizing the Coptic population is misleading because an upper class among the Copts has always existed and has also played an active role in Egyptian politics. Rather, it is the socially and economically marginalized among the Coptic community who have suffered the most from discrimination and inter-religious tensions. ¹

At the beginning of the 2011 revolution, many Copts were reluctant to join the protests, as the fear of chaos and insecurity without the protection of the dictator prevailed. After the first week of mass protests, the church kept its critical stance towards the protests, yet more and more Copts joined the protests at Tahrir Square. A previously unknown feeling of solidarity among Muslims and Copts appeared, and no inter-religious violence occurred during these days. This changed after the fall of Mubarak, and the overall security situation deteriorated as police forces withdrew from the streets. In addition, activists mobilized more than ever for their groups’ specific interests, which resulted in more open conflicts and several violent clashes, including among religious groups. The deadliest event occurred in October 2011 and is known as the ‘Maspero massacre’. It involved excessive violence by state security against protesting Copts. Pope Shenouda III however continued his cooperative style with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, and increasingly became the target of Coptic political activism.

The anti-military position was quickly overshadowed by the increased polarization between secular and Islamist forces after the electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. A great deal of mistrust also became visible in the constitutional process boycotted by most non-Islamist forces. Furthermore, the final text was criticized by Coptic bishops as an Islamist constitution. While the principles of the Sharia had been the main source of legislation since the constitution of 1971, the new Article 219 spelled out what the principles of the Sharia were: “general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence and credible sources accepted in Sunni doctrines and by the larger community.”

It is difficult to assess to what extent Morsi’s rule presented a threat to Copts directly, or whether Copts suffered more from the ‘side effects’ stemming from autocratic elements of Brotherhood rule. The overall approach of Morsi was to co-opt the influential institutions of the Mubarak era. The mobilization against Morsi by the Tamarod campaign and the subsequent ouster of Morsi ultimately made clear that the Brotherhood’s co-optation strategy had failed. Whereas the army broke up the alliance with the Islamists, business oligarchs used the means available to them, mainly private media, to mobilize against the Brotherhood. One of the oligarchs, Egypt’s widely known business tycoon Naguib Sawiris, a Copt himself, openly declared that he had provided the major funding for the mobilization of the Tamarod campaign. This shows that Copts are not simply passive victims but are pursuing their own agenda using the means available to them.

In sum, the relatively high level of violence in recent years has fueled old conflicts between the religious groups, and is perpetuating Coptic fears of exclusion and discrimination. This is causing the Coptic community to close ranks and rally behind the military-backed government. It remains to be seen to what extent new Coptic activism, such as the youth movements outside the church, will be able to challenge the monopoly of the clerics in representing Coptic interests and building inter-faith alliances for a political future beyond sectarian divides between belief systems.

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and Justice Party (the Brotherhood’s met with former Prime Minister Hisham Qandil and Brotherhood leaders Mohamed Ali Bhshr and Amr Darrag. However, Islamist leaders regarded the military-supported government as ‘illegitimate’ and refused to participate in any negotiations until Morsi was reinstated. The Freedom and Justice Party (the Brotherhood’s political arm) expressed “its surprise and condemnation of the official position of the European Union, which did not […] condemn the military coup that denied the Egyptian people their right to choose their president, their parliament, and their constitution.” On July 30, against a backdrop of recurrent violence and victims, Ashton returned to Egypt but made her visit conditional on her being allowed to see Morsi, with whom she eventually had a two-hour meeting. Her spokesman said, “everybody is ready to talk to us.” But all mediation efforts collapsed and the army violently dismantled Islamist protest sites, which led to the resignation of interim Vice President El-Baradei on August 17. On October 4, Ashton returned to Cairo for a new attempt to offer a framework for negotiations, but the officials whom she met refused to commit to such a plan before the Islamists stopped all protests and demonstrations. Within the European Union, member states, including Germany and the Netherlands, also attempted separate mediation efforts, but to no avail.

The United States

For its part, the U.S. did launch mediation efforts, but relatively late, appearing to want to let the EU play the most active role. During his first visit in mid-July, U.S. Under Secretary of State William Burns, officially sent by Washington to seek “an end to all violence and a transition leading to an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government,” left without having met any leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Only on his second trip to Cairo from August 2-8 did Burns meet the Brotherhood’s second most important figure, the imprisoned Khairat al-Shater. He was accompanied by EU envoy Léon and the Foreign Ministers of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Khalid Al-Attiyah and Abdullah bin Zayed. Morsi’s deputy refused to discuss the situation with the envoys, saying that the Brotherhood’s position on defending Morsi’s legitimacy was unchanged. On August 6, Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham also visited Cairo at President Obama’s request. The Senators called Morsi’s removal a “coup” – a term that the U.S. administration had avoided using because of its legal implications which involved suspension of aid. Obviously, this angered the transitional government and its supporters. A joint statement was issued by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Catherine Ashton on August 7, reiterating American and European readiness to assist Egypt, but admitting that this was only possible if the Egyptians chose the path of inter-party reconciliation. On August 15, after violent dismantlement of Islamist protest camps, the Obama administration announced it had cancelled joint military exercises, and on October 9, that it had suspended some military aid to Egypt (deliveries of F-16 fighter jets, M1A1 tank kits, Harpoon missiles, and Apache helicopters) but maintained it was continuing a strong relationship with the military-supported interim government.

In doing so, Washington was taking account of the deeply rooted role of the Egyptian army in the country’s history as well as its current reputation and popularity as a national army defending the country and its people. In today’s Egypt, the majority of the population views the army as a guardian of stability, security of society, and the borders of the state, and holds it in correspondingly high esteem. In this context, it should also be noted that American opposition to the violence by the Egyptian military against civilian protests critical of the ousting of the Morsi government and the ensuing debate among American lawmakers over continuing U.S. aid to Egypt prompted Israel to urge the United States administration to continue supporting the Egyptian army.17

[S]everal external Egyptian partners reacted in two ways: some, wary of Islamists, rushed to overtly support the new, interim, military-backed government. From the start, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council led by Saudi Arabia were very forthcoming in demonstrating their political and financial support of the new regime [...]. Others, like the EU, the United States, and the African Union, which recognized the new regime only as a de facto new authority, launched third-party mediation efforts to help resolve the crisis, lower the tension, and enable a stable and inclusive government to lead the country.«
The League of Arab States and the African Union

Soon after Morsi’s removal, Nabil El-Araby, the Egyptian Secretary-General of the Cairo-based League of Arab States, undertook an international tour to explain to key world leaders the “exceptional circumstances” prevailing in Egypt, thus legitimizing the military takeover. However, due to the difference of views among LAS members the organization could not really play an effective role mediating among competing Egyptian parties. The foreign ministers of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were sent as envoys on August 4 to meet al-Shater jointly with the U.S. and EU envoys, but even the Qatar minister, a strong supporter of Morsi, acknowledged the demand that Morsi be reinstated was unrealistic and compromise talks should focus on the future.

In early July, immediately after the ousting of President Morsi, the Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki asked the head of the African Union Commission, Dlamini Zuma, to help find a solution for the crisis in Egypt. He considered that “the Arab League gave up its mediator’s role the minute that Secretary-General Nabil Al-Araby sided with one party against the other.” However, the AU, by virtue of its Constitutive Act, had automatically suspended Egypt from membership as early as July 4, taking a principled position that its standards against “unconstitutional change of Government” apply to the “biggest and most powerful of its states, as much as to the smaller ones.” On August 1, a nine-member African Union ‘Wise-Men’ committee headed by former President of Mali, Alphar Oumar Konare, was permitted to meet with the deposed Egyptian leader, but could not convince either party to change its position because of its not only lacking approval for its mediation efforts but also influence on the situation in Egypt.

Reasons for the Failure of International Mediation Efforts to Solve the Egyptian Crisis

International efforts to resolve the political crisis, which followed the ousting of Morsi, have clearly failed. On August 7, interim head of state Adly Mansour declared in a statement that the “phase of diplomatic efforts has ended today” and the security forces started to break up the protest camps using force. These events show the limits of mediation efforts in a context of unappeasable positions: the military-backed government clearly excluded any reinstatement of the deposed president or a return to the suspended constitution, and was only ready to discuss limited measures such as release of some detainees, authorization of television stations run by the Muslim Brotherhood or safe exit for its leaders. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood rejected any substantial negotiations with the authorities unless Morsi’s legitimacy was recognized and the suspension of the constitution lifted.

In this context, the mediatory actors could not break the impasse, and the range of obstacles to effective mediation by the various actors prevented any meaningful results. While the European Union was approved by all sides in general as the most credible mediator, its influence on either party was limited. Its aid package (€450 million for 2011-2013) is significant but conditional on progress towards democracy, and little has actually been spent in recent months. For the powerful Egyptian military, such incentives have little weight as far as the strategic challenges facing the state and society are concerned.

The United States is considered a key supporter of Egypt and provides Cairo with $1.55 billion in aid given annually. However, Washington’s mediation was not approved and both sides did not trust the veering American course. On the one hand, to avoid having to suspend aid for legal reasons, the Obama administration abstained from calling Morsi’s removal a “coup,” and on the other hand, the administration could not remain idle in the face of the disproportionate use of force by the Egyptian military against the demonstrations. The situation was made even more complicated by the intervention of two leading Republican Senators, who expressed a different stance. In addition, there was widespread criticism in Egypt of U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson, who was seen as siding with the Muslim Brotherhood or even inciting demonstrations against the military-supported government.

The two regional organizations, which initiated additional mediation attempts, disqualified themselves quite early in the process. The Arab League, because of deep divisions among its members regarding backers of the democratically elected parliament and the President (Tunisia,
Qatar along with Turkey and Iran outside the LAS) and the supporters of Egyptian military opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, could only play a marginal role. The Egyptian Secretary-General of the LAS legitimized the military takeover and in the eyes of the Muslim Brotherhood clearly delegitimized the organization as a mediator for the dispute. The African Union could have appeared as a more neutral and less compromised actor, but it lacked the necessary influence, considering African interests are less affected by internal tensions in Egypt, and other conflicts on the continent continue to preoccupy African leaders.

In terms of timing, all mediators started their mediation efforts only after the removal of President Morsi, and most of them in an ad hoc manner. In combination with the lack of approval and the rather late timing, it was not possible for the mediators to transform the deep-rooted intra-Egyptian social conflict manifested in opposing claims for political leadership among the military, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other forces. In this radicalized setting, the dispute remained a battle to be won, and could not be transformed into a sociopolitical problem to be solved – all mediation efforts even involve some form of manipulation. Since it is very difficult to obtain knowledge on the subtle intricacies of mediation negotiations from open sources, this dimension is very difficult to judge and is not included in this issue. See on this POLICY BRIEF No. 4 by István Balogh et al.


Conclusions and Recommendations: Opportunity of the Moment vs. Defying Mediation

Egypt achieved three internationally praised mediation successes under two different governments: the unity deal between Fatah and Hamas, the Gilat Shalit prisoner exchange in 2011 under the rule of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, and the cease-fire agreement, which ended the military conflict between Hamas and Israel in November 2012, under the rule of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Although Morsi’s ability to exert influence seemed rather limited, legitimate Egyptian concerns and the clear incentive to find a solution both made him appear genuinely committed and as a result worthy of support in the eyes of both Israel and Hamas.

Appearances notwithstanding, the Brotherhood as well as the military that ousted Morsi could not do anything but seek and maintain close security coordination with Israel regarding the situation in...
Further Reading


the Sinai and the rule of Hamas in Gaza. The Muslim Brotherhood in turn could build on its longstanding association with Hamas, which as an offspring of the Egyptian Brothers had become part and parcel of the Palestinian resistance. For the first time, Egypt enjoyed political leverage and approval from both Israel and Hamas, and President Morsi made good use of this singular window of opportunity to achieve an internationally praised interruption of hostilities.

The mediation successes stand in contrast to unsuccessful efforts by external actors from the Middle East and the international arena to mitigate intra-Egyptian tensions in the summer of 2013. Already at the height of the early August standoff with the opposition, Ahmed El-Muslimani, the spokesman of Egypt’s interim president Adly Mansour, contended that “foreign pressure has exceeded international standards.” This marked an end to all mediation attempts and gave the signal for the violent removal of the Brotherhood’s protest camps. All mediators lacked substantial approval and influence. In such a complex crisis involving radicalized actors, inexorable stances and major strategic interests, short-term visits by medium- to high-level personalities may attract media attention, but are insufficient to allow the necessary, extensive, confidential dialogue which requires time, incremental confidence-building measures, and articulation of win-win solutions that would save face for each contesting side, lead to de-escalation of tensions and mutual gestures, thus paving the way for the long-term transformation of the conflict and reconciliation. A gradualist approach seems to be much more suitable for resolving the Egyptian – or any other – crisis than a ‘winner takes all’ attitude.

The same also applies to the Helsinki Conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles – with a ‘give and take’ attitude at its core. To be sure, the mediation successes enhanced Egypt’s diplomatic clout with regional and international actors. Yet the failed mediation efforts following the crisis of July 2013 and the resulting political, economic, and societal instability of the most populous Arab country have developed into another stumbling block on the way to convening the Helsinki Conference.