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Policy Brief Egypt – Introduction

Authoritarian Instability and Democratization Defeatism

ANONYMOUSLY

In order to protect the identity of the author, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung has chosen to publish the paper without naming the author.

Authoritarian Instability and Democratization Defeatism

by Anonymous

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After the euphoria of 2011, terrorism threats and the urge to seal Europe's southern border against migration and refugees has put security and stability back to the top of the foreign policy agenda. Yet the stability that comes with repression and «hard» security remains elusive. Support for democracy should move away from top-down approaches geared to achieve formal compliance with legal and governance benchmarks, and instead focus on increasing the autonomy and plurality of social actors. Democracy promotion should be a rationale for cooperation that is oriented towards societies, not rhetoric directed at governments.

«For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East, and we achieved neither.»

(US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo, June 20, 2005)

Nearly 12 years after this address, and six years after the uprisings of 2011, it appears that we have come full circle. In the Middle East, the «Agenda for Democratization»[1] has been turned into a nightmare of violence by an American foreign policy bent on domination, and by Arab regimes determined to burn their countries rather than step down. «Stability», or the lack thereof, has once more become the overriding concern when Western publics and policy makers think or speak about the countries to the South and East of the Mediterranean Sea. Democracy and democratization again appear as normative luxuries we can no longer afford – in particular when dealing with countries of strategic importance, such as Egypt. As a recent review of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) by a young Egyptian activist researcher noted, in the aftermath of the 2013 coup «the area of democracy and political reforms was completely omitted.»[2] After the coup of 2013, and the catastrophic turn of the uprisings in Libya, Syria and Yemen, Europe appears to have given up on democracy in the MENA region.

1   Boutrous Ghali, *An Agenda for Democratization*, UN, 1996, available at www.un.org/fr/events/democracyday/pdf/An_agenda_for_democratization.pdf, accessed 10 February 2017.
2   Nadine Abdalla, *The ENP between Ambitions and Delusions: Analysing Europe's Misconceptions in Supporting Democratisation in Egypt*, Euromesco paper 32, available at www.euromesco.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2269%3Aeuromesco-paper-32-the-enp-between-ambitions-and-delusions-analysing-europes-misconceptions-in-supporting-democratisation-in-egypt&catid=61%3Aeuromesco-papers&Itemid=48&lang=en, accessed 10 February 2017.

The most immediate reasons for this retreat (what this chapter refers to as «Democratization Defeatism») are not difficult to discern. When it comes to the MENA region, mainstream European public opinion and policy makers currently appear concerned with only two issues: terrorism and migration. This is especially pertinent in a year when right-wing populists are expected to make strong showings in at least three general elections in Western Europe. For both issues, the immediate fix appears to be strong governance rather than more democracy: to lock up terrorists before they can attack European interests or even European cities, to control borders so that migrants and refugees can neither enter nor pass, and to suppress internal conflict that may create new refugees.

In other words, stability is once more mostly seen through a narrow lens focused on hard security – in practical terms, jails, fences, and teargas that are thankfully deployed ever further out of sight. Poverty alleviation, the main focus of EU support since 2015,[3] supposedly reduces the incentives to leave and the danger of bread riots, allowing the security apparatus to focus on the «real» dangers. Rulers who appear to do a good enough job on this stability brief are unlikely to face more than muted criticism, leave alone consequences, for flawed democratic processes and unsavory human rights records. Those who have enough spending money to order submarines and power stations may even get to be called «impressive» by foreign dignitaries.[4]

The purpose of this collection, however, is not to accuse European foreign policy makers of sliding into cynical «realism». The dangers are real, and so are the dilemmas: there is no readily available recipe for a normative foreign policy approach towards Egypt that would promise to deliver a quick improvement to the situation on the ground. On the other hand, there is also little reason to believe that reconstructed authoritarian regimes can deliver the «stability» they promise in the medium and long term, and that playing along with the authoritarian narrative is the only option to stay in the game of economic and security cooperation.

The four papers assembled here support two core arguments: first, the notion that Egypt's security regime can deliver stability does not hold water in the short term. In the long run, authoritarianism instead entrenches factors that engender instability. Second, that giving up on democracy in Egypt is borne out of a too limited understanding of how processes of democratization occur, and out of an imprecise reading of the situation on the ground. There are things that can be done beyond (indeed ineffective) lectures on the virtues of democracy and pluralism, and besides (still necessary) credible threats to sanction human rights violations.

The authors of these papers are European, Arab and Egyptian researchers connected to major European think tanks and academic institutions. It is perhaps no surprise, and certainly indicative of the bleak reality of the country they study, that all but one of them preferred to withhold their names, despite being in a line of work where publication records

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3   Abdalla, En 1.

4   Klaus Stratmann, «In Praise of a Dictator», Handelsblatt, 18 April 2017, available at https://global. handelsblatt.com/politics/in-praise-of-a-dictator-496848, accessed 10 February 2017.

make or break careers. Fear of repercussions concerns those who live in Egypt. The brutal murder of the Italian PhD student Gulio Regeni little more than a year ago has not been forgotten. Fear of being denied future entry concerns those who live abroad. Even more pertinently, the Egyptian contributors explicitly related their concerns to the increasingly accommodationist positions that the EU and Germany are taking vis-à-vis their country. Normalization will not allow these actors to influence the situation for the better: quite on the contrary, it reassures torturers, assassins and spies that there will be no accountability, ever, for the crimes they commit.

Authoritarian Insecurity

As chapter one shows, the security approach is failing to deliver even on its most basic promise, which is to provide actual, hard security. Peaceful protests have of course been largely eradicated, even if labor unrest continues to simmer. Meanwhile, the real terrorists have enhanced their profile, as the attack on St. Peter's chapel in Cairo on 11 December 2016 dramatically underlined. The destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood, under the pretext of fighting terrorism, has backfired badly. Rather than confronting one enemy they knew and controlled well, and who committed its followers to non-violence and gradual change, the security forces now have to deal with an amorphous and sprawling conglomerate of groups and loose networks united only by their vengeance. Violent Jihadi groups recruit from this milieu with next to no ideological competition. As chapter 2 shows, the security sector in fact actively contributes to this process through the practices applied in its prisons and detention centers. Not unlike the Assad regime in Syria, Egypt's rulers appear quite content to see the most nihilistic and destructive elements among their opponents emerge at the forefront, discrediting even the idea of compromise.

The failure is most blatant in Sinai, where more than four years of heavy-handed security campaigns by one of the most heavily equipped armies in the region have failed to root out Jihadi insurgents counting barely more than 1,000 fighters. The reported fact that these fighters have received support by sea, carried on small vessels from as far away as the Libyan Sirte, along more than 1,000 kilometers of Egyptian shoreline, gives an idea what to expect from attempts to prevent refugee ships from setting out from Egypt. It appears highly implausible, for instance, that an 80 ton vessel would be filling up with hundreds of refugees over days without causing attention, as occurred in late September 2016 off the coast of Rashid.[5] When it comes to sealing the 1,000 kilometer long border to Libya against refugees trying to embark from there, it may be worth remembering that the refugee trail from Egypt into Israel across the Sinai Peninsula — a forbidding desert with only a few roads, which civilians can only access through two guarded crossings on the Suez Canal — only stopped after a high-security fence was built on the *Israeli* side of the border, which is only slightly more than 200 kilometers long.[6]

5   Al-Jazeera, «Egypt: 170 bodies found so far in refugee boat disaster,» 26 September 2016, available at www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/egypt-170-bodies-refugee-boat-disaster-160926101331817. html; accessed 10 February 2017.

6   Harriet Sherwood, «Israeli fence construction cuts off migration from Egypt,» The Guardian, 31 December 2012, available at www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/31/israeli-fence-cuts-migration-egypt, accessed 10 February 2017.

The Management of Misery

It is worth noting that the smuggling routes across the Mediterranean also serve a still small but growing number of Egyptians.[7] With the minimum wage now down to an equivalent of 70 dollars (100 with benefits, for those lucky enough to receive them), a sharp rise in inflation and further subsidy cuts and layoffs on the horizon, the number of people ready to risk everything is bound to increase. As chapter 3 discusses, things are liable to get (much) worse economically before they may get better, if they do at all. And while some of the reasons for the downturn relate to structural and external factors beyond the regime's control — such as low prices of oil, or the stubborn slump in Egypt's European export markets — others are clearly related to how Egypt's rulers consolidated their power over the past nearly 4 years. Billions of cheap Gulf money received after the 2013 coup were burned for salary increases meant to keep the grass roots of the regime — the state-dependent middle class — happy and off the streets. Large-scale building projects, such as the expansion of the Suez Canal and megalomaniac plans for an entirely new administrative capital east of Cairo served the regime's narrative of national grandeur, but failed to generate tangible benefits. If even Chinese investors withdraw, it should be time for second thoughts. What remained of the Gulf largess was wasted to delay the currency devaluation and the hardship that comes with it until such time where it could be blamed on the IMF. Much of the losses in foreign exchange earnings that created the immediate crisis relate directly to the failing security approach: it is difficult to attract tourists if airliners are blown out of the sky, and oil companies if foreign engineers are kidnapped and killed. As chapter 3 also points out, substantial reforms that could improve the performance of the Egyptian economy and generate more jobs remain difficult to fathom as long as social actors — labor, but also the private sector — are denied a voice and a framework for the legitimate expression of collective interest. Rather, it appears the lessons that at least a part of the military has drawn from the last Mubarak years is to forestall any possible challenge from actors in the economic realm — not least and perhaps especially by the economic elite — by furthering the expansion of military and military-connected economic actors into ever more areas. While this may make sense from the perspective of power maintenance, it remains difficult to imagine how such a strategy of a creeping return to a state- or military-led economy will lead to sustained growth without coordinated planning or cooperation with other social actors.

What we are left with, then, is most like going to be the management of misery — taking away as much as possible from everybody to fulfill (nominally, at least) the benchmarks demanded by the IMF to keep the credit lines open, while stopping short of pushing too many people over the edge of desperation that may explode into open rebellion. As chapter 3 argues, absent the capacity for political mobilization, and given the proven efficiency of

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7   IOM, *Migrant Arrivals to Europe via Mediterranean Top 210,000 in 2016; Deaths 2,859*, 14 June 2016, available at www.iom.int/news/migrant-arrivals-europe-mediterranean-top-210000-2016-deaths-2859, accessed 10 February 2017.

the repressive machine, this strategy may actually work for quite a while, making it easy for outside actors to ignore (once more) what is brewing under the surface. Yet even absent a huge explosion, which could indeed cause a wave of refugees unlike anything Europe has ever seen, it is bad news when a neighbor as geographically close as Egypt turns into an economic basket case that offers no future for its rapidly growing, mostly young population. Out of 100 million, even the trickle of the most desperate will amount to a significant influx, to not even mention the inroads it may open for political radicalism.

What Should be Done (and what not)

For nearly anybody concerned with formulating or criticizing foreign policy approaches towards Egypt, most of the arguments proposed above will hardly be news. Perhaps the most common response to such criticism is the presumed lack of alternatives: *not* engaging or cooperating with the current rulers of Egypt, or imposing strict conditionality, for instance concerning respect for human rights, is supposedly equivalent to giving away whatever (little) leverage or influence can be wielded through «dialogue». It means forgoing any chance to nudge the regime towards (slightly) better behavior, and for no gain: there is no point talking democracy to a partner who won't hear of it.

Such a perceived lack of alternatives speaks of an understanding of democracy promotion that is overly focused on state institutions as the tools as well as the object of reform. If we restrict ourselves to a perspective that understands democratization and reform as a technocratic exercise to achieve formal compliance with a canon of «good governance», then there is indeed little we can do without the cooperation of the regime that controls these institutions. And if we allow ourselves to be disheartened by the collapse of the process in 2013, and by the catastrophic outcomes in Yemen and Libya, the ingredients for «Democratization Defeatism» are complete.

Yet the historical record tells us that reversals are an integral part of transformation processes, such as we have seen in Egypt and the Arab region since 2011. As Barbara Geddes noted in 1999,[8] only about one third of the authoritarian regimes that came to an end after 1974 – the onset of the so-called «3rd wave of democratization» – were replaced by durable democracies. In Germany's immediate neighborhood, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Hungary, Bulgaria, perhaps even Poland and most recently Romania, had bumpy rides and reversals. Despite the strong normative influence and financial leverage of the European Union, some of these countries ended up marooned in the «gray zone»[9] of a seemingly

8   Barbara Geddes, «What do we know about democratization after twenty years?» Annual Review of Political Science, Vol.2 (1999) 115–144.
9   Thomas Carothers, «The End of the Transition Paradigm,» Journal of Democracy Vol. 13 (1), 5–21.

never ending «transition», ruled by «hybrid regimes»[10] that combine formally functional democratic institutions with pervasive features of authoritarianism. Taking the setbacks that we have seen since 2011 as evidence that the whole exercise is futile or incompatible with the specificity and the «culture» of the Arab region is throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

A historical perspective on transformation processes may also help alleviate fears of chaos and instability when it comes to Egypt. As Geddes points out,[11] the danger of conflict and civil war is greatest with authoritarian regimes that are highly personalized (as, for instance, in Libya, Syria, or Yemen) and *least* for those where power rests with institutions, in particular the military, as is the case in Egypt. Conversely, the latter are the *most* likely to opt for an orderly transition back to democracy once things get tight (for instance, as a result of economic failure), or when internal divisions affect the capacity to rule, as discussed in chapter 4. Such statistics are of course not an insurance policy, but they do put 2013 in perspective, and render the notion «stability at all cost» much less imperative than often argued. The political rifts within the «military institution» that chapter 4 discusses, and the conflicts of interests that will inevitably arise as the armed forces continue to expand their control over ever more economic sectors of society, may look like a cause for concern. Yet they could also be harbingers of change. European actors should remain alert to the various currents within the military, and weigh in in support of the term limits (which would oblige President Sisi to step down in 2022 at the latest) and the timely holding of presidential elections (due in May 2018) as prescribed by the constitution devised under the auspices of the regime itself.

Yet even below the level of a formal transition away from military rule, the four chapters indicate that there is a lot that can be done. But also, that there are things that should not. Insisting on the bare minimum of humane treatment for Egyptian citizens construed as enemies of the current political order does not mean we are holding «partners» to unrealistically high standards. It means we are drawing a line beyond or below which there can be no «partners», unless we are talking about partners in crime. There is no doubt that in Egyptian law enforcement, and in the prison and detention centers, torture is systemic. To cooperate with security personnel who come from this system and return to it as if they were part of a legitimate state institution is ethically (and perhaps even legally) indefensible and compromising. If Germany indeed intends to continue or deepen its «security cooperation» with Egypt, it is not enough to include «general reservation clauses […] that allow suspension of the cooperation when there is the danger of human rights abuses».[12] If no substantial improvement in the human rights record is achieved, then this cooperation must cease. Given the less than impressive record of these security services, the actual benefits and the

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10   Larry Diamond, «Thinking About Hybrid Regimes,» Journal of Democracy 13 (2), April 2002, 21–35.

11   Geddes, En. 8.

12   Deutscher Bundestag Drucksache 18/8148 (18-4-2016); Answer of the German government to an enquiry concerning «Cooperation in security agreements – criteria and standards».

value of the intelligence that may be available through it anyway remain unclear. What is clear, however, is which message it sends to those Egyptians who subscribe to the values that German Foreign Policy is nominally committed to, as documented in chapter 2.

A return to *conditionality*, one of the key terms of European Union's foreign policy approaches, is what chapter 2 argues, along with other voices that criticize the increasing gap between the normative values that the Union professes, and the *realpolitik* it applies to neighbors such as Egypt. These inconsistencies are of course nothing new.[13] After the July 2013 coup, an outpour of popular support for the aggressive, indeed chauvinist rejection of any form of external criticism by the new rulers further served to let the whole idea appear futile, a deal breaker that would only let the country veer further in the direction of authoritarian patrons with deep pockets, such as Russia, China or the GCC countries. Nearly four years later, the balance sheet looks different: the GCC countries are short of cash and entangled in a draining, hopeless conflict in Yemen. Relations to Saudi-Arabia have soured. Courting Russia, itself in economic difficulties, is unlikely to yield quick results as long as Moscow is preoccupied with sorting out the crisis in Syria, while China is scrambling to figure out how to deal with a potentially hostile administration in Washington. With empty coffers and wary friends, little is left to sustain the prior grandstanding – as the humbling walk to the IMF has underlined. Germany and the EU have more leverage than their foreign policy makers publicly ackknowledge. It may be a good time to revisit the principle of conditionality.

But it may also be a good moment to reflect about conditionality as such – about the strategy it should serve, what type of change it should aim for, and which audiences it should address. Obviously, Germany and the EU will never have or even aspire to anything even remotely similar to the leverage they had over Eastern Europe after in the 1990ies. Judging from the results there, that may not necessarily be such a bad thing after all. General demands for institutional reform, good governance and accountability would therefore almost certainly (and perhaps, conveniently) remain confined to a purely rhetorical sphere, even if the regime in Cairo were to feel compelled to switch from the sovereignist furor of 2013 back to an approach that pays lip-service to reform.

«Conditionality» should instead be realized through concrete and targeted offers of support and cooperation. The papers in this volume make some pragmatic proposals for what could be explored; a systematic effort including practitioners would doubtlessly turn up many more. Some of these conditions and offers come with a straightforward rationale that is normative and pragmatic at once: it is not only unethical to cooperate with security agencies whose practices turn prisons into incubators of extremism, but obviously also counterproductive. Working to improve the situation of refugees in Egypt and creating legal avenues for migration of refugees and Egyptians alike not only adds legitimacy to the effort to avoid illegal migration, but can also provide Germany and other countries of the «old» continent (in the

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13   Kristina Kausch, Assessing Democracy Assistance: Egypt, FRIDE, May 2010, available at http://fride.org/download/IP_WMD_Egypt_ENG_jul10.pdf, accessed 10 February 2017.

literal, demographic sense) with an influx of manpower that will become ever more needed.
Chapter 1 suggests that development projects in Sinai, which Germany certainly has the means to support, may turn out to be more effective in rolling back the insurgency there than the current approach has been over the past years. They can obviously only be implemented if the target populations are not simultaneously bombed – a logic that the authorities may be more receptive to if it comes with concrete offers of funding. Once the Egyptian government is ready to accept – if tacitly – that local communities have legitimate grievances, it may be possible to assist such a process with specialists in conflict resolution.

Chapter 3 proposes to support the upgrading of Egyptian industry, in particular the capacity of small and medium enterprises (SME) to replace some of the imported products that Egypt can no longer afford. As the author asserts, this should not only be seen as a medium-term approach to address the dangerously lopsided balance of trade and the resulting shortage of foreign exchange, but also towards a long-term structural change towards a more diversified economy that is generated bottom up, in contrast to the top-down approach of classic import substitution strategies. Unlike huge corporations, who have the means to buy influence and protect their interests by themselves, and frequently enter into a mutually beneficial symbiosis with authoritarian rulers, small and medium businesses are dependent on a level playing field, functioning institutions and a margin for collective interest representation. Their contribution to sustained democratization is widely recognized.[14] Rather than maximizing export figures, German economic cooperation should work towards a (not necessarily declared) agenda that promotes economic actors outside the military-economic complex. This would apply, for instance, to the development of Egypt's enormous potential for renewable energy,[15] where the promotion of smaller economic actors should take priority over the volume of equipment exported and megawatts produced.

Ultimately, all these proposals point to a strategic orientation that prioritizes the improvement of autonomy and bargaining power for local communities and social groups beyond the strata of the powerful and well connected, and assessing cooperation and project design from that angle. Which would also require, and that may perhaps turn out to be the most difficult part, to commit different agencies from at least three ministries to a common strategy, and to work towards a coherent, holistic approach for certain key countries. Democratization and democracy promotion should not be rhetoric directed at governments: it should be rationale for cooperation that is oriented towards societies.

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14   See for instance European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Investing in small businesses, building big economies*, available at www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/sectors-and-topics/sbi.pdf, accessed 10 February 2017.

15   See for instance *80 Gigawatts of Change: Egypt's Future Electricity Pathways*, Heinrich Böll Foundation North Africa & Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), 8 April 2016, available at https://tn.boell.org/fr/2016/04/08/80-gigawatts-change-egypts-future-electricity-pathways, accessed 10 February 2017.

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