The Obama administration and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab Revolutions. Taming political Islam?

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Abstract This article deals with US policy towards the Egyptian Muslim Broth- erhood. How has the leading world state power been dealing with the main Islam-ist movement, especially in the aftermath of the Arab upheavals? What is the intel- lectual approach to political Islam, specifically within the Obama administration? Has the anti-US potential been tamed or not? In light of the discourse held by US leaders and diplomats, I highlight the difficulties in addressing the Muslim Brother- hood. More specifically, I shed light on the way US policy of engagement towards the Islamist movement has been conducted.

Addressing the connection between the USA and a Pan-Islamic movement: a specific issue in the study of foreign policy?

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on US policy towards Islamism, especiallyin the context of the revolutions which occurred in the Arab world in 2011–2013. I define this policy as a set of concepts, measures and discourses undertaken in order to promote the national interests of the USA through its connections with Islam- ist movements—starting with that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The aimis to assess how the people in charge have framed and understood political Islam

through their public declarations, while also focusing on the intellectual, academic, and strategic debates that have been influencing the stances taken by US leaders and diplomats when it comes to the Islamist issue. As a great power, a significant part of whose national interest pertains to the Arab and Islamic world, the USA continues to attach crucial importance to actors who have the ambition of shaping the politi- cal landscape in this part of the globe (Lesch 2003; De Ceu Pinto 1999; Wolf 2015). This is particularly so in the Middle East, a region where the USA has to deal more specifically with actors claiming to struggle against its predominance in the name of Islam, seeking to generate a major geopolitical shift by expelling non-Muslim coun-tries (such as the USA) from the Middle East so as to unite the whole Umma under one single political and religious sovereignty (Adraoui 2017). These forces have also managed to integrate the institutional political field (Lynch 2012), causing one to wonder whether such an evolution could mean the possible taming of a discourse that was originally very radical.

Islamism is a school of thought which appeared almost a century ago, specifi- cally structured around the legacy of the Association of Muslim Brothers, founded by Hassan Al-Banna in 1927 (Li 1999). Islamist movements enjoyed the new reali- ties ushered in as of 2010, at least until political circumstances took them away from the spheres of power in several countries, such as the removal of the Muslim Broth-erhood from office due to the Coup d'état in Egypt in 2013. Egypt is one of the most striking illustrations, especially for being both the biggest Arab country as well as a State that is close to Israel, and with which several Arab countries have been dis- puting for decades. Following the Peace Treaty in 1979 which established a peace-agreement between Israel and Egypt, this historical Arab nationalist stronghold was definitely established as a founding pillar for stability in the Middle East, as sought by the USA. For instance, since 1979, Egypt has acquired 19 billion US dollars in military aid, making this country the second non-NATO recipient of US military aid after Israel. Egypt also received 30 billion US dollars in economic aid within the same time frame (Fawcett 2013). This makes the study of the relations between the USA and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt even more interesting. From the beginning of the "Arab Spring", Egypt aroused a great deal of attention from the US authori- ties (Lynch 2014). It is a key country for the defence of US interests and its allies

(Israel being in first place). Additionally, Egypt is also the historic cradle of political Islam, an ideological movement seeking to come to power in predominantly Muslim societies with the aim of establishing a state governed by religious fundamentalists, and of finally establishing the political independence of "Islam"—which is seen not only as a mere spirituality but also as a nation in search of new leadership after the end of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 (Hallaq 2012; Adraoui 2018).

The links between US officials and members of the Muslim Brothers are not new. In fact, they date back to the colonial era, and have been considerably rein- forced because of the Cold War, during which political Islam was seen by certain US leaders as a potential ally against the Soviet Union and communism (De Ceu Pinto 1999; Gerges 1999). Yet, for the first time in history, the leading world power had to deal with the main contemporary face of Islamism in the largest Arab country for over a year. Three introductory remarks deserve to be expanded on, as the Islam-ist policy of the USA—namely the set of actions and discourses that were designed

to interpret as well as to tame this ideology and its followers as part of defending American interests in the region—has three characteristics.

The first concerns an interaction between a traditional state seeking to defend its interests and a religious-political actor propelling itself towards the Muslim-world scale (and sometimes beyond). This has to do with the renewal of world politics thatwe can no longer summarize as the interactions between states seeking to promote "Westphalian interests and objectives" such as sovereignty and security in their classical sense.

Thus, the relationship between the USA and the Muslim Brotherhood mirrors a precise connection between a dominant state of the international system and a move- ment whose political ethics overtly aim to reverse the structures of this international system. Indeed, the international system's structures are perceived as supportive of the actors' arrogance (especially the Western states), who have Islam in their sight. This is why the revisionist agenda (Tammen et al. 2000) of the Muslim Brothers in diplomacy is clearly displayed as one of the priorities of the renewal policy they seek to initiate. In other words, examining this specific interaction requires one to bear in mind the weight of an ideology that clearly targets some states as iniqui-tous (Calvert 2010). For instance, in 2010, over a weekly sermon called How Islam Confronts the Oppression and Tyranny (against the Muslims), the former Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood (now replaced by Mahmood Ezzat), Muhammad Badie (suffering a life sentence in prison after he was arrested in August 2013 after the Coup), described the USA as a country that is easy to defeat through violence, sinceit represents a power "experiencing the beginning of its end, (is) heading towards itsdemise". The Islamist leader actually went even further by claiming that "resistance(is) the only solution against the Zio-American arrogance and tyranny".

The third and most original refers to the double dimension of the Islamist politi-cal parties' identity and platform. Effectively, despite its status as a transnationalmovement, Islamism and its followers, especially the Egyptian Muslim Brothers,seek to exercise power by taking position at the head of a given state (Baumannand Stengel 2014: 489–521). Islamists' goal is to build a society that is faithful tothe precepts of Islam, and then to consider a reunification of all their coreligion-ists around the world, which is a prelude to the restoration of the Caliphate. There-fore, US Islamist policy must take

into account this non-contradictory dual nature of political Islam. Since it is a current of thought aimed at overcoming the state, political Islam also seeks to preside over public affairs in every country where actors from this ideology are present. Advocating for a gradualist methodology consisting in a sort of continuous upward mobilization whose purpose is the re-establishment of the Caliphate, Islamists see the state-level as essential in order to change the Muslim countries' foreign actions that need to be reoriented towards a revisionist diplomacy. The first point in this article is to elaborate on what has been collected in terms of official discourses and positions made by US officials. It turns out that what we have here is a partnership that the USA did not necessarily wish or plan. Ultimately what some people consider to be an absolute capacity of setting up the Egyptian domestic agenda is first and foremost an attempt to establish certain rules of the game with the ultimate purpose of taming the challenging potential of the Muslim Brother-hood's ideology. Alongside other tools, such as economic incentives, US leaders and

diplomats have attempted to bring Islamist leaders to a common field based upon shared conceptions of what an acceptable policy is (in the US understanding of it). To do so, they have used moral incentives in particular, such as oral compliments but also criticisms or warnings symbolizing the aim to channel the Brotherhood's possible antagonism against the USA.

Second, I intend to highlight the fact that the US administration has constantly balanced between two stances: fear of the radical part of the Islamist ideology and confidence in seeing it become moderate, especially in the wake of debates seen in academic and policy-oriented research fields. According to the decisions made by the Islamist leadership, one trend seems to have overtaken another in the dis- cursive part of this "taming-process". Oral attempts to establish some rules of the game are indeed based on years of debates and discussions on the nature of political Islam, especially its capacity of generating moderate (according to US expectations) stances. Having to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood at the head of the biggest Arab state was not necessarily enjoyed, but the US leadership progressively moved on to an "open the door policy", making it possible to question their attempt to set up a modus vivendi with a force seeking originally to get rid of US primacy in the region.

Framing political Islam through the use of a constructivist perspective

To conduct a study of the American vision of Egyptian Islamism inspired by the Muslim Brothers [this Islamism was embodied on the domestic political scene by its partisan element, the Party of Freedom and Justice (Al-Anani 2011, 2016)], it would be interesting to focus on official statements from US officials. The construc- tivist analyses, which state that the interest of an agent is determined by the inter-representational configurations in which he/she is a part, give a central position to speeches and public statements. Even though it is not the only one, this interpre- tative lens is well suited for understanding the interpretation of political Islam by the Obama administration in power at the time of the Arab revolutions, and for the definition of the best policy to conduct. This is why I am primarily interested in public statements by the President, the Secretary of State and senior US diplomats dealing specifically with the Egyptian Muslim Brothers.

Since all these actors are linked by a common line defined at the highest level of political power, it would be possible to see their rationales, outlines and developments of American Islamist policy. As stated in the constructivist approaches, "speaking" is the central activity. It is effectively the most prominent element in the meaning-making process through which actors within the international system interact and represent each other. As Kubalkova (2001: 63) states:

> People do use the language (…) to influence other people. Thus, no matter how much they are aware of it or not, their representation of the world contrib-utes to its construction.

It finally turned out that US officials opted for an engagement diplomacy regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. In the framework of an ideational configuration through which two competing visions of political Islam (see below) have interacted, the US

national interest has been defined as the necessity to develop a measured engage- ment policy dedicated to taming the radical and revisionist potential that the Islamist conception of world affairs is supposed to generate. Far from containing, and even less rolling back, Egyptian Islamism, the US strategy has been trying to social-ize this movement and integrate it into the "international society" (Buzan 1993: 327–352) by making it aware of its responsibilities (glowing reports or warnings depending on the stances made by the Egyptian leadership under Islamist rule). Due to two different conceptions of Islamism stemming from academic and intellectual fields, through which ideational structures may emerge and apply to political dis- courses and decisions, this Islamist policy has primarily attempted to give a chance to the Islamists, before the US administration and its representatives are judgmental of what the newly established rulers of Egypt are doing. In doing so, aware of the fact that they have been explicitly targeted by the Islamist force as responsible for the Islamic world's weakness and division, the state power has remained nonethe- less capable of "doing by saying". By directly or indirectly creating a political and intellectual horizon of "preferability", the US diplomats in charge have finally sug- gested a modus operandi to be followed by the new Egyptian leadership. As words and discourses are likely to generate a certain understanding of reality, this Islamist policy, by engaging with a movement that had been contending with US primacy across Muslim countries for years, has encouraged a certain degree of taming of an ideology whose access to power was eventually expected to be softened in the name of a state logic, at the detriment of certain founding doctrinal principles.

A key factor in explaining the construction of an ideational structure when it comes to Islamist ideology: the academic debate

The use of a constructivist framework to analyse how "Islamism" has been inter- preted and defined at the head of the US administration requires first understand- ing how intellectual conceptions and ideational structures determine how a certain national interest is set. Indeed, to justify a given orientation when it comes to engag-ing with Islamist forces, especially at the head of the biggest Arab country at a time when this region seemed to be more unpredictable than ever, US leaders and poli- cymakers needed to rely on precise assumptions.

The established policy has been to attempt to socialize the Muslim Brotherhood by turning it into a partner so as to make this radical movement stick to an ethics of responsibility (Warner 1991) consisting, according to Max Weber's definition of this concept (Verantwortung-sethik), in an understanding of the possible causal effect of an action and the calcu- lated reorientation of the elements of an action in such a way as to achieve a desired consequence (Starr 1999: 407–434). This notably means that political Islam has cre- ated two contradictory pictures. First, this is undoubtedly an intransigent movement sharing, at least initially, a revolutionary agenda aiming at establishing the political independence of "Islam". This would lead to challenging all the status quo powers that are said to try to weaken Muslim countries.

There is, however, a second conception that is based upon the understanding of political Islam as a social movement capable of evolving and offering paradigms

shifts. This contrasts with the first image, which is primarily focused on the initial Islamist ideology, which is why it is reluctant to admit Islamists may "sincerely" change or be engaged like any other "normal" movement. This second conception is also eager to consider political Islam as first of all determined by social and his- torical conditions likely to generate different conceptions of the original doctrine as well as a movement reuniting activists likely to distance themselves from the origi- nal rigidity.

US policy towards political Islam has been echoing strategic and academic debates, through which certain components of the Islamist design are emphasized, to demonstrate that this ideology needs to be fully contained or, on the other hand, integrated into both a national legal political field and an international system to reinforce doctrinal amendments.

This is more or less the same debate that US elites had over the Cold War. Huge interrogations about the nature of the Soviet Union and the possibility of reforming communism and communists by integrating them into an international system whose constraints would force them to act more like state leaders than revolutionary lead- ers, thereby taming their original revisionist objective (Rosecrance 1976: 441–460), were characteristic of the Cold War era. To some extent, what we have here echoes this kind of debate. This ideational structure made up of intellectual conceptions, perceptions of the Islamic religion and historical relations towards Muslim societies allows us to consider US foreign policy towards the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from a constructivist perspective.

The specific ideational structure thus refers to these two competing ideas that can be defined according to the constructivist framework as "subjective claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of cer- tain actions" (Parsons 2002: 47–84). Being hesitant about which conception of political Islam it should adopt, the US administration has clearly based its Islamist policy on a sort of gamble, consisting in converting a political space for the Mus- lim Brotherhood that is said to allow political responsibility and moderation. This engagement strategy as built upon this dual perception of Islamism is largely due to academic discussions regarding the potential of evolution within this ideology (see below). Consequently, before, during and even after the Muslim Brotherhood's capture of power, US leaders and persons responsible have tried to find

the finest diplomatic tuning according to the circumstances (showing satisfaction and dissatis-faction depending on Islamists' stances). As the Brothers seemed to favourably echo this engagement policy, the conception of Islamism as going through a reformation process did progress. On the other hand, the perception of it as ontologically refractory to "modernization" was advanced whenever they disappointed the US admin- istration. The ideational structure thus identified took on meaning in the empirical realm through actors who were influenced by non-strict political spheres within which a certain understanding of political Islam was bolstered to the detriment of another as it is "able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" (Giddens 1984).

In this way, analysing the Islamist policy of the US administration in the frame- work of the Arab upheavals that occurred in 2011–2012 requires consideration about the interactions between a world-power and the proponents of an ideology seeking

explicitly to counter the US influence in the region and who finally capture the head of the state. To do so, according to the constructivist perspective, one would need to pay attention to the discourses coming from the leaders and persons in charge regarding the Islamist issue. More effectively than simple words put together, dis- courses and declarations act as actions in the sense that they reveal a certain mindset when it comes to a specific issue. Furthermore, they make it possible to access the way in which the "Islamist identity" is framed, namely as a doctrine that is reluctant to reformation or a belief that may integrate new elements to move into a more mod- erate, and even democratic conception of politics. Therefore, I have sought to study the most striking "linguistic constructions" and "social discourses" (Checkel 2008: 73) exuding from the main people involved in US diplomacy towards the Muslim Brotherhood before, during and after this movement seized power. Doing so allows us to understand how the Islamist issue has been constructed and to interpret the manner in which the engagement policy towards the Muslim Brothers should be undertaken.

More fundamentally, by trying to demarcate a certain field of action through spe- cific declarations and discourses, the US administration has mobilized two kinds of rules that explain, according to constructivist approaches, how a given group may become an agent within the international system. In this case, by seeking to estab- lish some shared rules with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Obama administration had left the choice to the Islamist camp, and in doing so, placed them in a position where they could observe or violate rules that were specifically designed to social- ize them directly or indirectly. On the one hand, the US leadership has established certain constitutive rules, while on the other hand it has sought to regulate rules. The first ones were meant to delimit a very specific field of action consisting first and foremost in the case of the relation with the Muslim Brotherhood of the refusal of violence, followed by the agreement for free-elections for the Parliament and the Presidency. In this respect, we can clearly observe that the vision of political Islam as a possible moderating force to the Jihadist ideology seemed to have overtaken the understanding of Islamism as sharing with Jihadism nothing but a difference of degree, rather than of nature. The second ones were established with the aim of defining what acceptable conduct would be within this specific field of action. This junction of constitutive and

regulative rules (Kubalkova et al. 1998) can clearly be identified in the declarations made by US policymakers and diplomats regarding the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, their exercise of it, and ultimately their dismissal.

Two founding approaches to political Islam: suspicion and opportunities for cooperation

Opened by the dynamics of protest, the period of Arab upheavals has not necessarily meant a change of nature of US diplomacy towards the Egyptian Muslim Broth- ers. US officials (people stationed in Egypt and executives of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs) have been in contact with the representatives of the Muslim Broth- ers (Hamid 2014a) for a long time. US officials have also been involved in public

diplomacy, whose aim is to establish connection channels and dialogue with non- democratic societies (where opposition actors oscillate between being bullied and punished).

Drawing largely on the contacts made with the opponents of regimes seen as con-ciliatory or even as allies of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, American diplo-macy has, at least since that time, tried to understand and work with actors, groups, and movements from the Brothers matrix. This also applies to non-Sunni Islamists, since their importance is real in Middle Eastern politics. The distinctive feature of the American position is surely its consciousness of the fundamentalist character of the Islamist offer. However, different administrations having succeeded in con- temporary times have swung between two positions (more theoretical than practi- cal) with regards to the Islamist question. In 2006, George Bush, Jr., was questioned about the political participation of the Lebanese Hizbullah in his country, and he replied the following:

> I like the idea of people running for office. There's a positive effect. Maybe some will run for office and say, "Vote for me. I look forward to blowing up America." But I don't think so. I think people who generally run for office say, "Vote for me. I'm looking forward to fixing your potholes" (Hamid 2014a: 39).

Before his election as President, Barack Obama publicly said that he was suspicious regarding the father movement of political Islam, namely the Muslim Brothers, describing them as "untrustworthy", "harboring anti-American views", and probably "not honoring the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel" (Gerges 2013a: 189–197).

Although political, this debate undeniably has deep ramifications for the intel- lectual and academic field. In fact, the think tanks, which are generally consid-ered "centrist", have in recent years distinguished themselves from the positions expressed above by the last two US presidents. While emphasizing the radical nature of Islamist ideology, those think tanks have not denied development opportunities, and in particular, the hypothesis of a more democratic political game in which differ-ent political forces would be able to express their opinions. This is especially true of many reports from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Brook- ings Center (Hamid 2014b), while other institutions, such as the Rand Corporation and the National Research Defense Institute, are characterized by a higher degree of

mistrust towards the Muslim Brothers. This institution has in reality produced some analyses that were close to those from Brookings (Martini et al. 2012), as well as more essentialist studies about the Islamic fact and the Islamist question (Benard 2003). For example, in Cheryl Benard's report, the question of democratization within Muslim majority societies is tied to the question of secularization, such that actors who claim a religious identity cannot be considered as privileged partners. It is no surprise that according to this view, factors explaining the absence of democra- tization in Muslim countries are generally related to religion and highlight that only a specific way of dealing with Islam in the public (and sometimes private) sphere is likely to generate a democratization process (the solution thus lying in a major religious reform). Even more fundamentally, this study draws a typology of Muslims in the world, dividing them between "secularists", "traditionalists", "modernists",

and "fundamentalists". Put in the "fundamentalists" category, the Muslim Brothers are not only analysed as less compatible with democracy, but also closer to Jihadist and terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida than moderate actors. Thus, the author argues that there is an ideological and political continuum unifying all the propo- nents of a radical form of Islam.

The problem of committing to a conscious Islamist policy consequently oscillates between an assumed reality principle and the search for the most suitable strategy to deal with the anti-status quo potential included in the Islamic ethic (Shakman Hurd 2007). This recent debate echoes great fractures in academia because of the oriental- ist tradition that first emerged in Europe and moved to the USA during the twentieth century, creating multiple discrepancies regarding the interpretation of both Islamic and Islamist facts. This happened at a time when the USA was taking over the tra- ditional powers from the other side of the Atlantic, while Islamism was becoming one of the major angles of analysis of the contemporary Muslim world. Influencing policymakers, these various approaches of radical Islam have been convened to jus- tify certain military and diplomatic strategies in the Middle East (Lynch 2005). As providing several of the key frameworks through which the Islamist issue has been interpreted, these considerations have moreover illustrated a specific comprehension of US foreign policy in the Muslim world, starting with the Middle East. Indeed, to a large extent, the assumption that political Islam could (or could not) be reformed to become a religious democratic force in the region is clearly connected to these debates on the nature of "Islam". Opposing understandings of what US foreign policy should be in this part of the world have effectively been discussed since the appearance of Islamism as a major player in most Muslim countries. Some policy- makers and academics have for instance argued that a significant change in US pol- icy in the region would be necessary in order to shape a new landscape that would encourage religious actors to become more moderate (Esposito 2010; Esposito and Voll 1996; Hoffman 2004). Others have to the contrary insisted on the primarily essential issue that was Islam's conception of politics, minimizing in doing so the role of the USA in the Middle East (Charai 2016; Hamid 2017).

Including the Muslim Brothers in the democratic push?

Seen as a dual force, the Muslim Brothers have been the target of a commitment policy tinged with mistrust (Gerges 2013b: 299–323). Indeed, while some argue that they are likely to be integrated into the political game, others underline that they seek to harm US interests in a region that is key for its safety. Until the revolution, the policy which prevailed was that of an opposition to Hosni Mubarak's regime. Indeed, it appears that the last years of the regime in Egypt generated much debate over its sustainability, and therefore, also much debate regarding the position to be taken towards the actors likely to challenge that power. This must be situated within a broader consideration of the necessary democratization of the states in the region ("Great Middle East"). Hence, the Bush years were characterized by the establishment of a Democratic Push (Hamid 2014a: 59) that also included the Islamist forces in the countries where diplomacy was chosen over military intervention. Assuming

that Islamism represents a potential ally against the systematically violent transna- tional jihadism, the Bush administration promoted a real "diplomacy of the opposi- tion" that continues to rely on Mubarak's Egypt, while keeping the option to discuss and work with his main opponent. The theory of an Islamist movement untied from its "absolutist" roots seems to prevail. The potential for political moderation pro- moted by the liberal think tanks (Brookings, Carnegie, Wilson Center, etc.) played a role, as shown by John Kerry's former position in the Wilson Center Board and the strong attention he paid to this centre's notes and reports, while he was running the State Department (Lynch 2014). For many years, these think tanks have highlighted that this moderation could be used in the case of democratization in Egypt. Accord- ing to US officials, the renunciation of violence (which is the official position of the leaders of the Brothers since the 1970s) is the discriminating factor that can justify talking with representatives of political Islam and then the opposition.

Obama pursued a largely similar strategy. For him, the time had come to question the foundations on which American foreign policy in the region was built. Thus, the highest US authorities began to consider redefining the links between the USA and undemocratic states, even before the beginning of the "Arab Spring", while perpetu- ating the structures of the alliance with Egypt. Supporting the sovereign right of the people in the Arab world to choose their political elites in his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009 President Obama pursued his thinking in August 2010 with a note of five pages addressed to his highest advisers. Entitled Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa (Gerges 2013b), the central argument of Obama's note is the need to stop believing that stability in the region comes from the support of autocratic regimes, and that American interests benefit from the absence of representative gov-ernment. Meanwhile, Margaret Scobey, the US ambassador in Cairo at the time, said in 2009 that "despite incessant whispered discussions, no one in Egypt has any cer- tainty about who will eventually succeed Mubarak nor under what circumstances" (Kirkpatrick and Myers 2012).

Gradually opening the door to the Muslim Brothers at the time of the revolutions: the growing awareness of new Egyptian realities

The months of January and February 2011 saw the power of Mubarak

falter, before which he had left in power a board of directors composed of soldiers. In the wake of the Tunisian revolution, many Egyptians expressed their desire to see the Rais leave. In the early days of the protest movement (which was physically crystallized by hundreds of thousands of people converging on Tahrir Square), US officials were primarily concerned about the situation of the president. Yet, the question of the Muslim Brothers quickly became central, as the need for Mubarak's departure was confirmed. It is in this context that Hillary Clinton, the State Secretary at the time, said in the first days of the demonstrations that "it's not America that put people into the streets of Tunis and Cairo" adding that "these revolutions are not ours. They are not by us, for us, or against us" (Hamid and Mandaville 2013: 97), before noting that the government in place was able to answer to the people's aspirations (Sanger 2011).

However, the evaluation of the situation quickly changed so as to leave room for serious concern if the power did not listen to the revolutionary aspirations. There were also concerns about the political situation that could result from a redistribu- tion of power at the highest level of the Egyptian state. Hence, the first references to the Muslim Brothers were made, reactivating the dual analysis that they had inspired at the highest level of US leadership for many years. Faced with the amplification of the protest movement (culminating on Friday, 25 January 2011 during the "Day of Rage"), the official US position, that had until then been a call to the Egyptian authorities, began to converge on the single issue of the president. This is well illustrated by the man who would become Secretary of State after the departure of Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, who stated that it was time for a critique of US policy towards Egypt. Hence, in the "Opinions" pages of the New York Times dated Janu- ary 31, John Kerry (2011) warns that:

> Given the events of the past week, some are criticizing America's past toler- ance of the Egyptian regime. It is true that our public rhetoric did not always match our private concerns. But there also was a pragmatic understanding that our relationship benefited American foreign policy and promoted peace in the region (…)
> Our interests are not served by watching friendly governments collapse under the weight of the anger and frustrations of their own people, nor by transfer- ring power to radical groups that would spread extremism (…)
> For three decades, the United States pursued a Mubarak policy. Now we must look beyond the Mubarak era and devise an Egyptian policy.

The conditions regarding the departure of Hosni Mubarak, and more specifically the role of the United States, are still being debated (Marcus 2011; Cooper et al. 2011). At the same time, increasing references made to the main Egyptian Islamist movement characterize the content of the US officials' talks. These speeches were effectively increasingly insisting on the need for a change of leadership, or even of regime, and less and less on the need for simple reforms. Even though some voices could still be heard during the months of March and April 2011 to warn against a possible rise to power of the Muslim Brothers' leaders (Gerges 2013b), Hillary Clinton, as the political transition progresses, started to explicitly open the door to Muslim Brothers. In fact, between

spring and autumn 2011, Hillary Clinton would have had many opportunities to echo the need to deal with the Muslim Brothers, recognizing that the reasons of the American foreign policy towards certain states in the region should be subject to criticism. For example, this is when several sen- ior diplomats of the State Department and of the Pentagon officially said that they were "encouraging…. conversations with an array of opposition leaders, including the Muslim Brotherhood" (Sanger 2011). The official position of the Obama admin-istration was eventually expressed clearly in June 2011 by Hillary Clinton, during a visit to Budapest:

> We believe, given the changing political landscape in Egypt, that it is in the interests of the United States to engage with all parties that are peaceful and committed to nonviolence, that intend to compete for the parliament and the

presidency (…) And we welcome, therefore, dialogue with those Muslim Brotherhood members who wish to talk with us. (Sheridan 2011)

In November 2011, the Secretary of State reiterated this by comparing the opening up to the Egyptian Islamists with the traditional support afforded to the systems in control, which could be the subject of criticism:

For years, dictators told their people they had to accept the autocrats they knew to avoid the extremists they feared…. Too often, we accepted that narra-tive ourselves. (Gerges 2013b)

The Muslim Brothers in power: taming the revisionist potential through verbal incitement and caution

The victories of the Muslim Brothers in the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections came to confirm this attempt at opening up and criticism from the Obama administration. Even though the Muslim Brothers still inspire a number of concerns about their defiance towards the USA and the possibility that they could harm US interests in the region, diplomatic engagement and inclusion remain the rule. For example, the year 2012 was marked with high-level meetings between members of the Brothers and US officials. They exchanged regularly, and the US officials were constantly seeking to gather Islamist sentiments and analysis while the Arab world was boiling (Fabbrini and Yossef 2015). While John Kerry recognizes the Muslim Brothers' victories, the US diplomats in Cairo at the time clearly announced that they wanted to work with "winner parties", highlighting (particularly regarding the Islamist movement) that its leaders have "been very specific about conveying a mod-erate message—on regional security and domestic issues, and economic issues, as well" (Kirkpatrick and Myers 2012). Thus, the fears expressed by Jean Kirkpatrick before parliamentary elections were overthrown by the official US position, synony-mous for openness and for integration of the movement. Indeed, while the former ambassador to the USA stated that "the Arab world is the only part of the world where I've been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions" (Gerges 2013a), Feltman (2012),

Assistant Secretary of the Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs, said:

> We know that parties rooted in religious faiths will play larger roles. We do notyet know what the U.S. relationship will be over the long term with emerging governments, parliaments, and civil society in these counties. We do know, however, that it will be vital that the United States establish and maintain the types of partnerships that help us protect and promote our interests and that give us the ability to help shape and influence outcomes (…)
>
> Our support for legitimate governments is the best means of countering vio- lent extremism. The peaceful transitions in Tunisia and Egypt fundamentally undermine the extremist message that violence is the only path for politi-cal change. Providing an opportunity for an alternative, non-violent path to

genuine political transition de-legitimizes extremist groups and reduces their appeal.

In April 2012, echoing these statements, a delegation of representatives of the move-ment was hosted at the White House to meet the highest US authorities, only a few months after high-level US representatives (including William Burns, responsible for relations with Ikhwan) were received in Cairo. The advent of a Brothers majority at the parliament and the arrival of Mohamed Morsy's presidency offered an oppor-tunity to verify the relevance of the engagement policy towards the main winners of the liberalization of the regime.

At the time when the Egyptian state was in a transition, the relationship between the USA and a political-religious movement that was now leading the main Arab country unquestionably confirmed the duality of the historical position of the US elites towards the brotherhood. If we look at the public statements of the US ambas-sador, Anne Patterson, this duality is still present. Indeed, the months of the Mus- lim Brothers' governance generated both a good report and distrust. Thanks to the responsibility that they demonstrated on the economic and international fronts, par- ticularly during the Gaza conflict in November 2012 when their role and ability to put pressure on Hamas was hailed by US officials, to the point that it was described as "positive" (Gerges 2013b), the governance garnered a good report; however, dis-trust arose regarding their ideological framework and their propensity to oppose American values and interests on certain issues. The statements of Anne Patterson are illustrative of this duality. In 2011, she said that she was "not personally com- fortable with it enough yet" with regard to recognizing their commitment to eco-nomic freedoms, but having concerns about their views like "its less liberal stances on women's rights", as well as about their position relative to the 1978 peace treaty with Israel (Pierce 2014: 68–86; Negrin and Abdellatif 2011).

On a more practical level, financial, military and diplomatic arrangements that were in force at the time of Mubarak have not been changed. For example, the sum of 1.55 billion dollars traditionally allocated for strategic assistance continued to be paid, even though the US authorities stated that it was intended to finance the security efforts of the Sinai region, in order to perpetuate the security of the Israeli neighbour (Gerges 2013a).

Since the coup D'etat: back to square one? From Taming Islamismto balancing between the two main Egyptian political contenders

The period initiated by the eviction of the Muslim Brothers in July 2013 pro- duced a dualism in American Islamist policy, as dealing with the Muslim Broth- erhood had to be from then on coupled with the need to find a modus operandiwith the regime of President Sissi, who became the elected leader of Egypt a few months after the evictions (in the configuration consecutive to the arrest of Presi- dent Morsy and of the major Brothers leaders). In other words, after having spent 1 year trying to tame the Islamist revisionist potential, a new constraint emerged, namely working with the new Egyptian government while not closing the door to

the Muslim Brotherhood. Dealing with political Islam in this configuration has meant balancing between the main political currents in this country. This prob- lematic relationship with the main face of Egyptian political Islam is found in the words of the same John Kerry, who had, 2 years earlier, outlined a logical criticism about the diplomacy that the US had been building in the Arab world for years. If the phrase "coup d'état" has not been pronounced by any official, the successor of Hillary Clinton said that "Egypt's generals were restoring democ- racy" (Hamid and Mandaville 2013: 97). However, a few days after the army takeover (and while there are visible tensions between the two camps), Barack Obama expressed different feelings in an official statement from the White House:

> We are deeply concerned by the decision of the Egyptian Armed Forces to remove President Morsy and suspend the Egyptian constitution. I now call on the Egyptian military to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible through an inclusive and transparent process, and to avoid any arbi- trary arrests of President Morsy and his supporters. Given today's develop- ments, I have also directed the relevant departments and agencies to review the implications under U.S. law for our assistance to the Government of Egypt. The United States continues to believe firmly that the best founda- tion for lasting stability in Egypt is a democratic political order with partici- pation from all sides and all political parties—secular and religious, civilian and military.

A few weeks later, the US administration sent a new delegation (including a num- ber of officials who had travelled in 2012, like William Burns) to Egypt in order to meet with the military and the Muslim Brothers that were detained at the time. In addition, on the military level, common operations that were planned at this time were simply cancelled by the US side. Repeated by the diplomats of the State Department, this ambivalent position illustrates the complications that char- acterize the discourse and the action of the United States. Thus, Elisabeth Jones, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Bureau, said that:

> Mr. Morsy proved unwilling or unable to govern inclusively, alienating many Egyptians. Responding to the desires of millions

of Egyptians who believed the revolution had taken a wrong turn and you saw a return to secu- rity and stability after years of unrest, the interim government replaced the Morsy government.

But the interim government has also made decisions inconsistent with inclu- sive democracy. We were troubled by the July 3 events and the violence of mid-August. The decision to remove Morsy, excessive force used against protesters in August; restrictions on the press, civil society and opposition parties; the continued detention of many members of the opposition; and the extension of the state of emergency have been troubling.

As regards Marie Harf, the spokesman of the ministry, she said on 12 February 2014:

The United States does not—has not designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. We have been very clear in Egypt that we will work with all sides and all parties to help move an inclusive process forward. We've also repeatedly, both publicly and privately, called on the interim government to move forward in an inclusive manner. That means talking to all parties, bring-ing them into the process. We're not saying what the future government should look like specifically other than that it should be inclusive. That, of course, includes the Muslim Brotherhood. We will continue talking to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as part of our broad outreach to the different parties and groups there.

Thus, since the immediate post-coup d'état, it seems that the embarrassment and the wait-and-see policy are the main features of the US position. The "neither–nor", or rather the "and–and", is the guiding principle (dealing with the new regime and sparing the Brothers). If it recognizes the now somewhat non-questionable instal- lation of Marshal Sissi at the head of the state, the American diplomacy remains attached to not completely closing the door on the Muslim Brothers, at least dis- cursively. Hence, they recognized the exceptional nature of the current situation in Egypt, but said at the same time that mistakes were made by the Islamist move- ment when it was in government. On a more general scale, it seems now taken for granted at the top of the US decision-making process that political Islam, although today ousted from power, "will remain a potent social force and a lightning rod for regional politics" (Hamid et al. 2017). The fragility of all the regimes ruling today over the Arab societies has indeed reinforced the belief that Islamist movements would 1 day or another return to power. In this regard, it turns out that the experi- ence that related the USA and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood will be a key mile- stone in the understanding of how to deal with political Islam in the next decades.

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