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“Shifting Sands: The Future of the U.S.-Egyptian Relationship”

The Center for National Policy

1 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Washington DC, 20001

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On Wednesday, The Center for National Policy hosted a panel discussing the future of U.S.-Egyptian Relations in light of important internal developments in Egypt that have put stress on bilateral relations. The panel featured Professor of Political Science and International affairs at George Washington University **Nathan Brown**, Director of the Rafik Hariri Center at the Atlantic Council **Michele Dunne**, and Professor of Economics at the National Defense University **Paul Sullivan**. The event was moderated by former Analyst at the U.S Department of State **Gregory Aftandilian**.

Brown addressed a question concerning the process in which the Egyptian government will write and develop its constitution. Brown stressed that the constitution will be developed in “the Egyptian Way,” describing this process as taking the standing constitution, revising it keeping what they like and taking out what is undesirable. The last constitution, said Brown, led to a system dominated by the executive power. Brown said there are “**two debates**” being held. The first, which is relatively unimportant, is how the document handles identity, religions, and Sharia principles. The second, which he urged the audience to “read closely,” concerns **the distribution of political authority and the re-engineering of the Egyptian State**. The second debate will define the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Egyptian military. Brown stated that the MB has been leaning toward a “Gaulle’s Model” of governance “with an Egyptian twist.” The twist, said Brown, is that unlike the French model, the **Egyptian model will have a non-partisan president, the military will operate “with some degree of autonomy,”** and, with what he referred to as the “Balkanization of the Egyptian State,” institutions that were formerly run by the president will emerge “only accountable to themselves” as the governing power of Egypt. Brown concluded his answer saying that the biggest problem is if the **100 person assembly which is to write the constitution will be truly representative of the people**.

Dunne continued discussing two important observations about recent developments in Egypt. The first, she said, is the **movement of political power from the executive branch toward the legislative** which she defined as a “natural” transformation from dictatorship. “Now,” said Dunne, “the parliament is emerging as a popular legitimate governing body reflective of the votes of the Egyptian people.” The second observation was “**a four-way struggle for power**” which characterizes the political environment. She said that there is a power-struggle occurring between the army, MB, the “Tahrir forces,” and the Salafis. Because of this, Dunne said the SCAF and MB are delaying the election of a president because they would then have to deal with another power source.

Dunne explained the current environment of the Egyptian parliament. The first is the “laser like focus” the MB and Salafi parties had post-revolution on winning elections. She said that the Islamists were “passing out pamphlets” while the “leftists demonstrated in Tahrir.” Secondly, **the Tahrir forces are using the issue of a delayed presidential election as an excuse to accuse the MB of being “complicit in keeping the military in control.”** Dunne discussed the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party’s “serious proposals” concerning its plans for economic development. The MB is concerned with domestic issues and thus, according to Dunne, has come to accept the delegation of a certain amount of power to the president. The MB is under a lot of pressure to remain representative (chairs of all the committees are from the FJP) and is leaning on the President to deal with issues such as foreign affairs. She also said that the “non-partisan presidency” would be temporary. The Eternal Conflict (Israeli-Lebanese/Palestinian) will force the president to take action considering public opinion, most likely forcing the president to react.

Sullivan weighed in on the events of the past year, emphasizing that every written opinion piece or analysis is “speculative.” He said that the revolution “hasn’t started” yet and the actual effects of the past year will not be seen for another 50 years. “There were elections, and people were surprised because they don’t understand the **Sha3b** (people),” said Sullivan. Sullivan made some prescriptive recommendations explaining **that “the best thing [the U.S.] can do is ‘stay out of it... fix the economy... and if you’re going to do anything, don’t do it in public.’** He supported his answer by saying the U.S. has not seen the effect of Islamists coming into power across the MENA region; he said the U.S is unsure of how these governments will interact.

Sullivan expressed that the U.S. government does not understand the new Egypt. He said that its best relationship is with the military and the worst thing it can do is “throw the military under a bus.” Elections went to Islamists, said Sullivan, because “the liberal elites are not in touch with society” and “missed all political cues sent to them by the people of Egypt.” “The Ikhwan and Salafiyeen used Chicago style politics: get voted in and get the food out,” said Sullivan. Concerning the peace with Israel, Sullivan said that the military is the most likely to keep the peace. **If Israeli-Palestinian relations get worse, Egypt will have to be “held accountable to the street.”** Sullivan stressed the need to “get people on the ground” in order to understand the people. He stated that economic, political, and foreign affairs issues may cause fragmentation between the military, Salafis, and the MB. The emerging political powers, said Sullivan, must not “fall into ideological traps because of the lack of worldly experiences” as a “new psychology” evolves in Egypt.

Dunne addressed a question about how best to get the economy moving again in Egypt saying that the **first thing to do is to restore security to the country.** Without restoring internal “national security” by developing a respectable police force, tourism and foreign direct investment will not be restored. Dunne also refuted part of Sullivan’s argument, emphasizing the unwavering support of the military saying that “when it is perceived that we [the U.S.] work through the military, it is not the best way to conduct foreign policy.” She ended saying that the inability/unwillingness of the ruling SCAF forces to get the police back on the ground is a major, if not their largest, failure.