With Egyptians having just gone to the polls in the first democratic presidential election in their history, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies hosted a panel discussion on the country’s ongoing political transition. Before a capacity crowd on Monday, June 18, 2012, FDD senior fellow Khairi Abaza, a former senior official in Egypt’s secular liberal Wafd party, appeared alongside Steven Cook, Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Oren Kessler a Tel Aviv-based journalist. The event was moderated by John Hannah, a senior fellow at FDD and national security advisor to former Vice President Richard B. Cheney.

At the time of the event, Egyptians were still counting votes, but Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi had already claimed victory with a 52 percent majority, while Hosni Mubarak’s former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq claimed it was too early to declare a result.

While observers anticipated that these elections would mark “something approaching the start of a democratic transition,” Hannah said, “It seems to me that that is not in the cards.”

“In light of the extraordinary events of the past four or five days,” Hannah continued, namely, “the full-blown counterrevolutionary surge of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the old order, we have been launched into a new phase of this struggle, which could last for quite some time, with dangerous consequences for Egypt, the United States and the Middle East.”

SCAF’s decision to grant itself sweeping new powers seems “a tailor-made recipe for intensifying confrontation, long-term political instability and even violence,” Hannah contended, while Egypt faces “growing levels of crime and lawlessness, a very anemic economy, and parts of the country such as the Western desert, the border with Sudan and the Sinai look more and more like they are turning into ungoverned spaces.”

“15 months ago, I think it was possible to believe we had dodged a bullet,” Hannah said. We thought “the emergence of political and economic reforms would take place without jeopardizing Egypt’s basic strategic orientation to the United States, Israel and the Camp David Accords.”

“Alas, all those hopes have passed away,” Hannah concluded, noting Egypt’s “unilateral abrogation of the gas treaty with Israel,” and “the sheer incompetence and venality of the SCAF…with a healthy assist from the unfettered ambitions of the Muslim Brotherhood, and even worse, the Salafist movement.”

What might the U.S. do to mitigate the damage?

“We’re starting this panel without knowing the final results,” Khairi Abaza said. Yet “whoever wins knows that he’s winning with few votes, because about half the registered voters did not vote, in a highly divided and fragmented country. Whoever is elected will have to govern with
the military, and the transfer of power to civilian rule will not happen as some had wished for. The army will hold on to legislative powers and the budget until a constitution is drafted and a new parliament is elected according to it.”

Nonetheless, Abaza argued, “something has changed in Egypt. The army is not the sole political actor, as it was for the past 60 years. Even as the army wants to maintain control and protect itself, it became one of the political actors. It has to work with political parties. It has to work with Islamists, and secular groups.”

If Morsi wins the presidency, Abaza explained, the Muslim Brotherhood will push for a presidential system, in which the president has most of the power, while the military will push for a parliamentary one. If Shafiq wins, the reverse is true.

But “no political force can monopolize power, and no group is weak enough to be completely wiped out,” Abaza explained.

“Each actor cannot eat the whole pie,” Abaza concluded, “but just one slice of it.”

Oren Kessler took a decidedly less optimistic perspective. “This morning, there was an attack on Israel in which one Israeli civilian was killed,” he noted, and mentioned other attacks in which unknown terrorists had fired Grad rockets into Israel.

It’s no secret that the Israeli political establishment would prefer Shafiq, Kessler said. “He favors stability. He’s not prone to adventurism in diplomacy or military matters. He’s well-connected in Israel. He’s the only front-running candidate who said he would visit Israel. He’s the only front-runner who has not called for the Camp David Accords to be revised.”

In contrast, “Morsi is kind of the consummate Brotherhood man,” Kessler continued. “In my view, there’s not a reformist bone in his body. As we know, it’s an anti-Western organization, and an anti-Zionist organization. It’s also a deeply anti-Semitic organization. You see this from its founding in the 1920s…Hassan al-Banna was an admirer of Hitler, Sayyid Qutb was an admirer of Hitler.”

“About 85 percent of Egyptians view Israel negatively,” said Kessler, “and 61 percent want to overthrow the treaty entirely. Many more want to revise it.”

“Last summer,” Kessler noted, “there was a quite sophisticated terror attack from Sinai in which eight Israelis were killed. The gas pipeline has been attacked 14 times in as many months.”

Worse, “there’s a tremendous flow of Libyan weapons going into the Gaza strip,” Kessler warned. “It’s a free-for-all in Sinai.”

Israel, Kessler explained, is building a fence on the border with Sinai, which is expected to be done by the end of the year, and it has called up several reserve battalions and authorized another 16.
“But beyond that, there’s really little Israel can do,” Kessler concluded. “Israel has the anti-Midas touch. Any party it touches turns to dust.”

“Egyptians have been under the yoke of the military for the better part of the last 60 years,” Steven Cook said. “As a result, Egyptians in a relatively freer environment have a lot of issues that they need to work out.”

“What is the relationship between religion and state? What does Egypt stand for?” he asked. “I would submit: Nothing.”

Yet, Cook concurred with Abaza that “no political actor has the power to impose its will on another,” and “as a result, they have stalemated.”

“We should expect no change out of Mohamed Morsi’s presidency with respect to hostility toward Israel,” Cook predicted, but “that said, I don’t think Egypt is in any position to threaten Israeli security.”

Still, “even if Shafiq comes to power at the behest of the SCAF,” Cook said, “politics in Egypt have changed radically, and the peace agreement is wildly unpopular.”

The Egyptian army’s decree granting itself extraordinary new powers “was a bold move, but not entirely surprising,” said Cook, noting that “the Egyptian military has stepped in, whether discreetly or openly, at times of crisis or concern and overseen the reengineering the institutions of the state.”

The military elites have also said “they would never salute a non-nationalist president,” Cook pointed out. “I took that to mean they would never salute a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Cook noted that Washington does not “have a tremendous amount of leverage,” and “our aid isn’t actually worth all that much to many Egyptians anyway.”

“I think $1.3 billion is not a lot of money,” Cook said flatly. “It was a lot of money in 1983, when the Egyptian economy was one-tenth the size it was on the eve of the uprising.”

“The aid is worth 40 to 50 percent of what it once was, and it also comes with conditions that the Egyptian armed forces don’t like.”

“Egypt is going to be more like the stock market,” Abaza stated. “One day down, one day up. But over the past 16 months, it’s up.”

“Nobody can control it entirely,” he said. “We get only the bad news from Egypt. But in fact, there is a process. We’re all part of it, Islamists, secularists….and overall, this can give hope to other Arab countries.”
“The important thing is not to support a dictator or a new authoritarian regime,” Abaza concluded. “The U.S. should be very clear we’re not supporting any return to any type of authoritarian order, whether military, Islamist,” or otherwise.

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