

Middle East Is Sinking Deeper Into Instability

By [Javier Solana](#)

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Instability continues to spread in the Middle East, with the military coup in Egypt the latest episode to trigger political tremors throughout the region. With its 85 million people and strategically vital location, Egypt is the most important country on the Mediterranean's southern shore. Continuing the democratization process that began there in 2011 is urgent.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist government, led by Mohamed Morsi, demonstrated all too well its incompetence and incapacity to ensure an inclusive democratic transition. But the solution offered by Egypt's military is far from ideal. Coups always tend to exacerbate problems, not solve them, and this one is no exception.

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The first consequence is that Egyptian society is even more divided over the question of political legitimacy. Morsi's supporters cite the legitimacy of his victory in a democratic election a year ago and the illegitimacy of the army's coup and detention of the deposed president, while his opponents defend the legitimacy of the massive, countrywide protests against him.

The Muslim Brotherhood tried to go too far too fast. Its Islamist agenda put crucial state institutions — namely, the army and the judiciary — on edge and clashed with the liberal, modernizing demands of its opponents. The Tamarod movement, which organized the protests that led to Morsi's ouster, celebrated the military's decision to intervene.

That precedent is dangerous for a fledgling democracy. The Islamists must have representation in order to ensure that they do not renounce the ballot box as a means of pursuing their objectives.

Neither the Islamists nor the military can build a new regime against the will of a significant part of the population. Despite Morsi's poor performance in office — a year in which he presided over grave economic deterioration — a solution that served the cause of national and regional stability would have been preferable.

Instead, the coup, coming just one year after the formation of an elected government — and just a few months after then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Morsi to mark the end of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip — could give rise to great frustration among Islamists across the region. Indeed, the region's geostrategic situation has changed again since the Clinton-Morsi meeting, and the response of both the United States and the European Union — for which the Mediterranean is crucial — has been late and erratic. It is not clear who are allies and who are not. The EU, in particular, should engage the region with clearer, more coordinated and more effective policies.

Aside from the domestic situation, Egypt has another urgent problem. Egyptians depend on the Nile River, and Ethiopia has begun construction upstream of what will be Africa's largest hydroelectric dam. The project is being pursued in the face of strong Egyptian objections — military intervention has been threatened — yet it continues apace. If the dam is built as planned, the volume of water flowing northward could be reduced by 20 percent, jeopardizing Egyptian agriculture and the livelihood of millions of people.

The coup in Egypt may have serious regional consequences as well. Syria remains mired in a bloody civil war that has already caused more than 100,000 deaths. Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime has celebrated the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood's government and is seeking to use Morsi's failures and removal as justification for repression at home, making it even more difficult to find a political solution that would end the fighting.

The Syrian opposition, a crucible of widely different groups and currents — including Al Qaeda — will most likely become even more radical following Morsi's ouster. For Hamas, strongly

linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the coup means losing Egypt's support, which also implies that Israel is one of the countries that stand to benefit the most from the coup.

Qatar, which had been Morsi's main protector by offering him a large credit line, is in the midst of its own political transition, and has remained detached from Egypt's turmoil. The rift between the Gulf monarchies is becoming ever clearer, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates quick to finance the post-coup government.

Turkey, which had often proclaimed its Islamist democratic model as a goal for other Muslim-majority countries seeking democratic change, has also lost out as a result of the coup in Egypt. Turkish foreign policy had sought to create a regional order with the participation of other Sunni Islamic regimes in accordance with the country's interests. Egypt was clearly the most important part of this strategy, and its political instability has raised questions not only about Turkey's political model but also about the security of its economic interests.

The future of Iran is another matter of great regional importance that remains unresolved, postponed until the new president, Hassan Rouhani, takes office. It is hardly encouraging that there has not been any serious gesture toward the country from the U.S. or the EU since Rowhani's election victory in June.

In short, the Middle East is sinking into deeper turmoil, and we are farther away from finding a solution in Syria, Egypt and other key sources of regional instability. There is much handwringing but too little serious thought about how to strengthen the region's security, economy and social model.

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