

*INSS Insight* No. 1183, July 1, 2019

**Mohamed Morsi: Martyr or Traitor?**

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**Reactions in Egypt to the death of Mohamed Morsi, six years after his ouster as president, reflect ongoing social and political polarization, in Egypt in particular and the Middle East in general. While President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime has sought to downplay Morsi's death, Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Egypt labored in the social media to use the event to bolster their influence. Ultimately, the regime managed to contain this volatile event. At the same time, while the pro-Islamist discourse over social media did not translate into broad action on the ground, it is a reminder that the Muslim Brotherhood still represents a considerable segment of the Egyptian people. Israel's official response – not to comment on Morsi's death – was correct. At the same time, it is clear that strengthening Israeli-Egyptian relations depends inter alia on weakening the forces of radical Islam, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and on bolstering pragmatic and liberal forces.**

Mohamed Morsi was elected as Egypt's president in June 2012, toppled from power twelve months later, and died that same month in 2019. In the 2012 elections, Morsi, an engineer by profession, was the Muslim Brotherhood's default choice after the initial candidate, Khairat el-Shater, was disqualified. He reached a second and decisive presidential election round, against Ahmed Shafiq, who was the last Prime Minister under President Husni Mubarak and was identified with the old regime. Many of the supporters of the January 25, 2011 revolution voted for Morsi in a hope for change – not necessarily out of ideological support for his movement. He appointed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Defense Minister and Mohamed Ibrahim as Interior Minister; subsequently they removed him from power, following popular demonstrations calling for his ouster. Some in Egypt believe that Morsi was the wrong man at a critical time when the country needed a leader who would navigate its course from authoritarian rule to democracy.

Morsi was convicted on three criminal charges and faced a 20-year sentence for the violence outside Ittihadiyya Palace; 25 years for relaying classified information to Qatar; and three years for contempt of court. In addition, he was a defendant in two open court cases, accused of spying for Hamas and involvement in a breakout from Wadi el-Natrun Prison. During the six years of his imprisonment, his relatives were allowed to visit him three times. He suffered from diabetes and according to those close to him did not receive proper medical treatment, and ultimately – according to the general prosecutor's

announcement – died of a heart attack during a retrial hearing. Morsi, who was elected by a 51.73 percent majority – representing more than 13 million Egyptians – was buried in the middle of the night, with the funeral attended by only a few members of his family.

The reactions to Morsi's death demonstrated the ongoing polarization in Egypt and the region, six years after his toppling. While el-Sisi's regime has sought to downplay the event and the Egyptian state press made do with laconic reportage on the inside pages, Muslim Brotherhood supporters exiled from Egypt worked actively on social media to use the event to bolster their influence. The debate that evolved after Morsi's death between the political and public forces vying for Egyptian public opinion and between the pro-Islamist and pragmatic regional camps centered on the three issues:

- a. **Martyr or traitor:** Many of those on social media emphasized that Morsi had been the first and last president elected democratically in Egypt. His death sparked much debate regarding his presidency, as reflected in online discussion. Members of the Brotherhood as well as some of their political rivals saw him as a symbol of a failed revolution. By contrast, articles and commentaries in Egyptian state media declined to describe Morsi as "former president" and depicted him as the leader of a movement that acted – and continues to act – in the name of narrow sectarian interests with the goal of undermining the ethos of the Egyptian nation state. Eulogies and words of comfort delivered by Salafi-jihadist movements after his death were cited as evidence of links between Morsi and his movement to terrorism and as corroboration of his unworthiness of an official obituary. "If you chose to side with the motherland, then the motherland will mourn you," explained Muhammad Amin in his column in the pro-regime daily *al-Masry al-Youm*. "And if you chose to side with the [Muslim Brotherhood] movement, then it is the movement that will mourn you."
- b. **Murder or heart attack:** The Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters' official narrative is that Morsi was murdered, rather than having died naturally of a heart attack. The fact that the authorities did not permit an official acceptable to the Brotherhood to see the body or carry out an autopsy was cited as supporting the narrative that transformed Morsi from a "regular" fatality to a "holy" martyr who sacrificed his life as part of a religious struggle. It was further discussed on social media that denying Morsi medical care worsened his condition, which led to his death. For their part, regime spokesmen rejected the conspiracy theory as an attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood to exploit the death for its political ends. They argued that Morsi had died in public and not in a hidden locale, and that state authorities had conducted themselves with decency and transparency in investigating the death and bringing him to burial.

- c. **Narratives of rival regional camps:** Turkey and Qatar grieved at Morsi's death and accused the Egyptian regime of murdering him. Turkish television and Qatar's al-Jazeera broadcast ongoing coverage, including archival clips resonating of Morsi's work during his years in office. Hamas maneuvered cautiously between identifying doctrinally with the Brotherhood and its dependency on the el-Sisi regime, and its media made do with citing verses from the Qu'ran and recalling Morsi's support for the Palestinian cause. By contrast, fully half of the censure from spokesmen for the Egyptian regime was directed at Turkey, which hosts the Muslim Brotherhood exiles and allows their media activity, and at President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who called for an international investigation into Morsi's death. Saudi Arabia backed Egypt's side with a viral campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, which was accused of harming Islam's image and destabilizing the region.

It appears that thus far, the el-Sisi regime has managed to contain the situation relating to Morsi's death and preserve security and political stability. The Egyptian public did not respond to Muslim Brotherhood calls to hold popular funerals in a tribute to Morsi, the Africa Cup of Nations football tournament opened in Cairo on June 19 as planned and without incident, and in parallel, there were reports of arrests and the foiling of terrorist actions planned for the June 30 anniversary of the revolution. The regime's achievements reflect several possible explanations: fear of a crackdown on protest; the low media coverage of the event; a decline in the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood and of Morsi himself since his term, which is remembered as one of failure and polarization; and delegitimization of the Brotherhood, which has been branded as linked to terrorism, espionage, and treason.

At the same time, the Egyptian regime is still struggling to entrench its own public legitimacy in its ability to ensure stability, economic gains, personal security, and individual civilian rights. The pro-Islamic discourse on social media – though it did not translate in this context into public mobilization – serves as a reminder that the Muslim Brotherhood has not disappeared, although their political power is weaker, compared to the past. It still aspires to serve as a future political alternative, and its supporters make up a significant segment of the Egyptian people (according to a Washington Institute for Near East Policy poll published in December 2018, the Brotherhood enjoys a “somewhat positive” opinion among about one third of the Egyptian population). Furthermore, some among the Egyptian public disavow both political camps equally – the Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand, and the current regime on the other.

### **Significance for Israel**

Israel's attitude to the Morsi's period is complex. Contrary to initial concerns, the peace treaty survived, and Egypt even strengthened oversight of the Gaza Strip border and helped mediate between Israel and Hamas during Operation Pillar of Defense. However, Morsi consistently avoided mentioning the name "Israel" in his speeches, made statements in support of Hamas, and enabled visits to the Strip by Iranian and Turkish delegates.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's pragmatic behavior, it is very doubtful that its fundamental hostility toward Israel would have allowed the preservation of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty over time, not to mention any advancement of cooperation (which is flourishing under el-Sisi) on strategic issues of security and energy. It is not impossible that a continued Morsi rule would have brought rapprochement between Egypt and the pro-Iran axis or the creation of an Egyptian-Turkish Islamist axis. There is also a wide gap between the current regime in Egypt and the Brotherhood regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Egypt sent a delegation to the economic workshop in Bahrain (albeit one low in rank), the Brotherhood labeled the participants "regimes hostile to the Arab peoples and betrayers of the Palestinian cause," swore to maintain "non-recognition of the Zionist entity," and declared that "the day will yet come when Cairo celebrates the liberation of Palestine, and Palestine shall celebrate Cairo's return to its proper place."

Israel was correct not to issue any official comment on the Morsi death, as this would have been perceived as meddling in Egypt's internal affairs. At the same time, it is obvious that strengthening Israeli-Egyptian peace relations is conditional, inter alia, on weakening the forces of radical Islam, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and on bolstering – at their expense – pragmatic and liberal political and civic forces.