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OPINION | FEBRUARY 9, 2011

Could al Qaeda Hijack Egypt's Revolution?

Terrorists in Pakistan and mullahs in Tehran want to see chaos in Cairo. A splintered army and premature elections would help their cause.

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By **KENNETH M. POLLACK**

It is the nature of revolutions to be entirely unpredictable. Most fail, and even those that succeed often follow paths that no one foresaw—not their targets, not their protagonists, not the partisans on any side. The Frenchmen who stormed the Bastille never foresaw the Terror. The Russians who stormed the Winter Palace never imagined Stalin's purges, the Gulag or the Great Famine. Most Iranians never meant to build a theocracy.

The uprising in Egypt is far from over, and neither is America's necessary role. We must work to guard against the worst outcomes, which may seem remote but are all too likely in the unpredictable maelstrom of revolution:

- *The disintegration of the Egyptian army.* Though hardly a paragon of democratic virtue, the army is the most important institution in Egypt, and it is vital to a peaceful transition to a moderate form of government. If the army fractures, Egypt will descend into chaos.



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The uprising in Egypt is far from over, and neither is America's necessary role.

U.S. officials don't know how loyal the army's senior officers feel toward Hosni Mubarak, nor how sympathetic the enlisted men feel toward the protesters in Tahrir Square. Nor do we know where the loyalties of middle-ranking officers lie, but it is not hard to imagine that they are caught betwixt and between. At some point that no one will recognize until after the fact, the military may lose its cohesion and its ability to act on anyone's behalf.

Thus the U.S. must maintain its extensive ties with Egypt's soldiery, bolster their spirits, and encourage them to act as the impartial guardians of their country's orderly transition. It's imperative that the U.S. help Egypt past its current deadlock before divided loyalties tear apart the army.

- *Premature elections.* If there is a need for a speedy resolution to the present impasse, the answer should not be an accelerated move to new elections. Where elections are concerned, speed kills.

Elections are an important element of democracy, but they are not synonymous with democracy. Few things can do more harm to a nascent democracy than premature elections. To see the proof, look at the Bush administration's disastrous insistence on elections in Palestine and Iraq well before those societies were ready for them.

Egypt is not ready to have good elections. It needs a new constitution and time for viable political leaders to establish parties, something the Mubarak regime prevented for 30 years. It is an open question whether eight months will be enough, but advancing that timetable would be incredibly reckless.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood likely represents only a minority of Egyptians, it probably would dominate any early elections. It is the only true mass party in Egypt, well-organized and disciplined, with a well-known track record and a well-understood political platform.

The Muslim Brotherhood is not al Qaeda, and it might provide reasonable leadership of a new government. But perhaps not. We simply don't know, because Mr. Mubarak never allowed the Brotherhood any meaningful degree of participation in politics, so it never had to show its true colors.

It could be disastrous if the Brotherhood got to pick the next president of Egypt simply because it was the only organized party when elections were held.

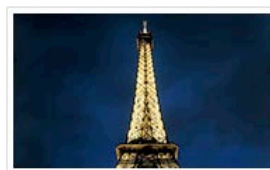
- *A reprise of Lenin's 1917 train ride into the Russian Revolution.* Whatever our concerns about it, the Muslim Brotherhood is essentially the "Menshevik" faction of the Egyptian revolution. It espouses a moderate version of an ideology common among the Egyptian opposition and other Arab opposition movements, and it says it is willing to live and work within the constraints of a democratic system.

But revolutions often get hijacked by equivalents of the "Bolsheviks," extremists who previously seemed so marginalized that they could never pose a real threat. The "Bolsheviks" of the Egyptian revolution are sitting in caves in Pakistan. They are the Salafist extremists of Ayman Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad and other groups that sought to bring about an Egyptian revolution throughout the 1990s. They waged a vicious terrorist campaign to try to do so and

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were ultimately driven from the country and into the arms of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, where they became one of its dominant factions.

We should not doubt that when Zawahiri and his cohorts heard the news from Tahrir Square, they were probably jubilant that the revolution they had sought for so long had begun. They were likely also frustrated that they were not there to hijack it and lead it toward the radical Islamist state they seek. Zawahiri is probably doing whatever he can to play catch-up—to dispatch his supporters to Egypt to take control of the revolution.

The Iranian regime is also gleeful about the collapse of Mr. Mubarak, one of America's most important Arab allies and one of Tehran's most passionate enemies. Iran's mullahs often see opportunity in chaos and violence, believing that anything that disrupts the region's American-backed status quo works to their advantage. Witness their various efforts over the years in Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and Bahrain.

Tehran may have already concluded that turmoil in Egypt suits its interests far more than any successful transition to stable democracy. Turmoil, after all, might prevent a new American ally from emerging and enhance the chances that Egypt's new regime is more radical and friendly toward Iran. All of this gives Iran and al Qaeda common interests that may drive them toward tacit cooperation—with the goal of fomenting a modern Bolshevik Revolution.

In 1917, the Kaiser's Germany famously arranged a train to take Vladimir Lenin from his exile in Switzerland across Germany to Russia. Berlin knew that Lenin was a wild radical who wished no good for Germany either, but it facilitated his entry into the Russian Revolution because it hoped he would make the situation worse and accelerate the collapse of the Russian state. It's a model that could hold great appeal for Tehran today.

All of this may seem unlikely, but revolutions are also unlikely events, and once that threshold is crossed, old rules about what is normal and likely go out the window. That's why those who start revolutions are rarely those who end up in charge when the smoke clears and the barricades come down. And it's why the U.S., as Egypt's friend and ally, must try to prevent a revolution made in the name of democracy from being hijacked by something much worse.

Mr. Pollack is director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

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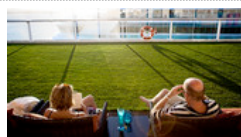
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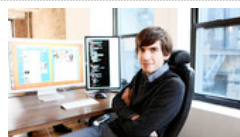
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