

# Egypt Seeks Regional Approach to Syria

Led by Egypt, key Muslim nations also including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran are exploring ways to reduce the political violence in Syria, an initiative that upsets some in Washington because it represents an independent regional approach, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

For a second-choice candidate (the Muslim Brotherhood's original candidate in Egypt's presidential election was disqualified), Mohamed Morsi has been active and assertive since taking office.

Most noteworthy was his successful engineering of the retirement of Egypt's most senior military officers and his reclaiming of some powers that the unelected Supreme Council of the Armed Forces had earlier taken away from the elected presidency. Now Morsi is spreading his wings in foreign policy with an initiative that aims to work with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran to try to reduce the bloodshed in Syria.

This is just the sort of move that will generate significant heartburn among many in the United States (and even more in Israel). First, because Islamists, including anyone from the Muslim Brotherhood, get treated automatically with suspicion, and any assertiveness on their part is viewed with distrust.

Second, because this particular initiative will be seen as undermining the isolation of Iran. And isolation of Iran has become even stronger dogma than suspicion of the Muslim Brotherhood. That isolation long ago achieved the status of being treated as if it were an end in itself, with nary a thought given to whether isolation of Iran contributes anything to resolution of problems with Iran, rather than prolonging or even exacerbating those problems.

Actually, Morsi's initiative ought to be smiled upon. Its objective of reducing the accelerating bloodshed in Syria is a laudatory goal and one expressed by most other governments. The governments he is engaging are appropriate ones to engage on this problem because of their regional prominence and ability to bring influence to bear on the subject. One can look on this project as a good example, from the U.S. point of view, of what Leslie Gelb was talking about when recommending that the United States not try to solve every world problem itself but instead recognize that other states have problem-solving responsibilities too.

The Syrian civil war is a thankless tar baby of a problem, and we ought to be

pleased when someone else is willing to have a go at trying to do something about it. Morsi's prospects of success have to be rated as low, but it is hard to see any significant downside of even a failed attempt on his part.

Those who reflexively worry about any improvement in Egyptian-Iranian relations should note that even if such improvement were somehow contrary to U.S. interests, it isn't, and it could even represent a useful channel for the United States, Morsi is not rushing to bring about such improvement.

There evidently is no move afoot to restore full diplomatic relations with Iran, even though most other Arab countries have such relations. Morsi is not talking about Syria to improve relations with Iran; his government is talking with the Iranians to try to do something about Syria.

There are many ways in which players in the Middle East, acting out of their own interests, can do things that also are consistent with U.S. interests, as long as we do not try to impede such actions because of a rigid and artificial conception of who are good guys and who are bad guys in the region.

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## Boy Scouts Still Embrace Discrimination

The pledges of the Boy Scouts of America to follow the nation's laws and to befriend those who are different are increasingly at odds with the club's continued rejection of gays and people who don't believe in God, discriminatory policies that former Eagle Scout John LaForge protests.

By John LaForge

The camping and knot-tying club Boy Scouts of America has reaffirmed its discriminatory exclusion of about 10 percent of all boys, the gay ones, and of any out lesbians who volunteer as Cub Scout den mothers. The BS's flagrant bigotry is rationalized and accepted, "unanimously" we are told, by its military-style leadership based in Irving, Texas.

BS policy, renewed in July, says, "we do not grant membership to individuals who are open or avowed homosexuals or who engage in behavior that would become a

distraction to the mission of the BSA." Sorry boss, but discrimination, homophobic bias and the avalanche of negative press distract from the mission.

Today, after the U.S. military has ended its official policy of lying (Don't Ask, Don't Tell) which kept thousands of service members in permanent fear of outing and expulsion, a large group of Eagle Scouts are publicly disowning their awards and returning their medals in protest of the prejudice. If I could find mine, I'd happily add it to the pile of discards in Texas.

Ever since I accepted my patch from Minnesota's Troop 22 in 1974, I've received an annual invitation to contribute to the Eagle Scout Banquet Fund. I reply to this request every year with an invitation of my own. I remind the BS that I will donate after first reading of a public renunciation of both the group's official homophobia and its pious intolerance of non-religious free thinkers, and then only after I see in print a public apology to the GLBTQ and agnostic and atheist communities for Scouting's long-standing discriminatory policies along with an new and open membership invitation to one and all.

While current and former Scouts have all promised to be "loyal," as well as trustworthy, thrifty, helpful, etc., the group's directed embrace of discrimination, as Sam Stites wrote in *Willamette Week*, begs the question: Loyal to the Texas Chain of Command, or loyal to the protection of constitutionally protected civil and human rights? The BS Oath's pledge to be "Obedient" says clearly: "A Scout ... obeys the laws of his country" which today generally forbid discrimination.

While map reading and orienteering are two of the most interesting and challenging joys of scouting, the BS looks today like a Flat Earth Society claiming the sun revolves around us. While the country as a whole is embracing inclusion and respect of all people, BS executives in Texas have decided "to teach division and intolerance," as Chad Griffin of the Human Rights Campaign said.

By its own definition of loyalty, the Oath says a Scout is "true to his family, Scout leaders, friends, school and nation." If this list is prioritized, it's clear that Texas demands loyalty to its bizarre, archaic edicts before a Scout should think of his country or the law of the land. No. Scouts need to make a choice for fairness and inclusivity, even in the face of official BSA ignorance and paranoia.

The Oath says Scouts are to be Brave: "He has the courage to stand for what he thinks is right even if others laugh at or threaten him." Reverent: "He respects the beliefs of others." Kind: "He treats others as he wants to be treated." Friendly: "A Scout is a friend to all. He seeks to understand others. He

respects those with ideas and customs other than his own.”

Until Texas gets it right, Scouts everywhere should follow their Oath and rebel. Every Scout in the country should refuse all further meetings, volunteer work, honors, contributions or fundraising until the commanders’ exclusionary bigotry is apologized for and made null and void.

**Former Eagle Scout John LaForge is on the staff of Nukewatch, a nuclear watchdog and environmental justice group in Wisconsin.**

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