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Anti-U.S. Hostility Ramps Up in Egypt

Media Outlets Blast American Policies, Further Straining Ties

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Opponents of ousted President Mohammed Morsi sit under anti-American banners in Cairo's Tahrir Square on Thursday, reflecting the increasing hostility toward the U.S. from a broad range of factions in Egypt.

A headline in a major Egyptian state newspaper this week referred to the proposed U.S. envoy to Egypt as the "Ambassador of Death." Posters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, a center of pro-government rallies, depict President Barack Obama with a beard and turban, exclaiming his "support for terrorism."

Another large Egyptian newspaper alleged Sen. John McCain, who traveled to Cairo this week in an effort to break a deadlock between the government and its Islamist rivals, has chosen sides by employing Muslim Brotherhood staffers in his office.



(Left to right) European Pressphoto Agency, AFP/Getty Images (2)

Photos of President Obama were burned, defaced or shown with a beard during the protests.

Egypt's state and privately owned media outlets, already no strangers to demonizing the U.S., have embarked on a particularly critical campaign. The latest salvos have targeted Robert Ford, the likely nominee for American ambassador to a country that is pivotal to U.S. foreign policy.



Egypt's state and privately owned media outlets have embarked on a particularly critical campaign against the U.S. Adam Entous joins Lunch Break with more. Photo: AP.

The moves highlight the depth of public distrust of U.S. policies, and draw from a "reservoir of anti-Americanism and conspiratorial theories," said Vali Nasr, dean of the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies and a former senior Obama administration adviser.

America, he says, has few fans in the country after the 2011 overthrow of U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak and last month's military ouster of Muslim Brotherhood-backed President Mohammed Morsi. "We're caught in a situation of having to essentially try to find a balance between our values and our interests. It satisfies nobody," Mr. Nasr said. "The Mubarak people are unhappy with the way he was shoved off without a thank you. The military thinks we coddled the Brotherhood and didn't intervene to control them. And the Brotherhood thinks that we never supported them when they needed support, and then gave the green light to the military."

The latest anti-American hysteria is a throwback to Mr. Mubarak's three decades of rule, when state-owned media fixated on a common enemy such as Israel or the U.S. in what critics called a bid to rally the nation and deflect from government shortcomings. Now, according to several observers, Egypt's new military-backed government is using the same playbook to divert attention from internal tensions toward what newspaper headlines and television anchors call U.S. meddling in Egyptian affairs.

"The state media are programmed to the line of whoever is in power. They don't need instructions or calls to be told what to write," said Hisham Qassem, a founding publisher of privately owned Al Masry Al Youm, a major newspaper. Years of state-cultivated xenophobia have left Egyptians suspicious of foreign policy and America's interests in Egypt, said Mr. Qassem, who is now starting up his own newspaper and news channel.

Egypt's state media acts independently, said a spokesman for the Egyptian military, Ahmed Ali.

U.S. officials say they are used to the onslaught. "There's been a great deal of misinformation out there," State Department spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki said Thursday. "We've been taking every step possible to convey what our view is."

The spike in rhetorical hostilities only adds to the discomfort in a relationship that has been vital to both countries in recent years. Egypt has come to count on some \$1.5 billion in mostly military aid each year from the U.S., while Washington wants Egypt to maintain its peace treaty with Israel and help the U.S. against terrorism.

The Obama administration last month didn't declare the military's ouster of Mr. Morsi a coup. The White House froze the transfer of F-16 warplanes but hasn't cut off other forms of assistance. Based on that, the country's state media has reasoned that the U.S. is unlikely to cut off aid, analysts said.

Hopes that America could reset its relationship with Egypt by appointing a new ambassador are dwindling as well, after the fierce media campaign that has targeted Mr. Ford. Mr. Ford has served as the U.S. Ambassador to Damascus since late 2010.

The White House hasn't formally nominated Mr. Ford for the Cairo post.

A fluent Arabic speaker, Mr. Ford has served in many of the Middle East's toughest spots. In Iraq, he was known for pressing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government to crack down on Shiite militias who were attacking U.S. troops, often in collaboration with Iranian intelligence organizations.

Some in the Egyptian government have voiced displeasure with Mr. Ford's expected nomination. One official in Cairo said he had hoped to have "a fresh face" as the next U.S. ambassador, not a diplomat seen tied to unpopular U.S. policies in the Muslim world.

The campaign against Mr. Ford comes despite requests, according to U.S. officials, from Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to Egyptian military chief Gen. Abdel Fattah Al Sisi to intervene to stop the incitement of anti-Americanism.

Mr. Ford's former boss in Baghdad, recently retired American Ambassador James Jeffrey, said the charges in the Egyptian press were "completely unfounded."

"He is the best we have," Mr. Jeffrey said of Mr. Ford. "His service in Iraq and in Syria were on orders of the president to go where the situation was the most delicate and dangerous, and to do the very best he could."

One U.S. official said: "If it's not Ford's nomination, they'd find a way to criticize someone else."

The criticism against Mr. Ford erupted this week. An article on Monday in Al Ahram, the flagship state newspaper, called Mr. Ford "the engineer of destruction in Syria, Iraq and Morocco" and "the man of blood."

The privately owned Al Watan newspaper this week called Mr. Ford "a superstar in the world of intelligence" sent to Cairo to "finally execute on Egyptian lands what all the invasions has failed to do throughout the history."

While stressing the media is acting on its own, Mr. Ali, the military spokesman, said: "You can't bring someone who has a history in a troubled region and a lot of unrest, make him the U.S. ambassador to Egypt and then expect people to be happy with it."

On a trip this week to Cairo as part of efforts to urge reconciliation between the Brotherhood and the government, Sen. McCain, an Arizona Republican, showed visible frustration with the rising anti-American sentiment.

"Let me just say as a friend of Egypt, we Americans see the demonization of our country in Egyptian state media and these kind of actions are harmful to our relationship and to your

friends," Sen. McCain said Tuesday. He warned that some representatives in the Congress wanted to sever America's relationship with Egypt.

A spokesman for Mr. McCain on Thursday denounced accusations in Al Watan that the senator had Brotherhood staffers. "It's sad to see these supposedly legitimate news outlets make comments so transparently absurd and outrageous," the spokesman said.

The demonization of America in Egyptian state media has the potential to play out in dangerous ways that can't be reined in by the government, some observers said.

In the past few months, two U.S. citizens were stabbed on Egyptian streets—one fatally—with one of the attackers telling police that he had traveled from afar to Cairo in search of an American to kill. Last fall, thousands of protesters stormed the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, some scaling the walls of the fortified compound, tearing down the American flag and replacing it with an Islamist one.

Egypt's media appeared to bolster sentiments voiced by Raef Elwishee, a protester living in a dirty, torn tent in Tahrir Square, to demonstrate his support of the military's overthrow of the Brotherhood.

Mr. Elwishee, 51 years old, said he is a dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen with a wife and three children who live in Missouri. He now spends his time holding anti-American placards in Tahrir Square, one with Mr. Obama's face crossed out with red.

"In general, Egyptians want America out of Egyptian affairs. For the U.S. to take the Brotherhood's side is not goodwill. They have a deal to give power to the Brotherhood in Egypt and in exchange the U.S. will give Sinai to Israel," Mr. Elwishee said with a slight American accent.

When asked for his thoughts on Mr. Ford, Mr. Elwishee didn't hesitate. "He's a troublemaker. It's enough to know that he was ambassador to Syria," he said. "He is top in one of the U.S. spy agencies...and we don't need that kind of relationship."

When asked where he had read about Mr. Ford serving as an intelligence agent, Mr. Elwishee answered: "I'm telling you from the newspapers I read and the people who watch TV and tell me about it."