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Report From Egypt

Eric Margolis

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CAIRO – Tahrir Square, epicenter of the earthquake that ousted Egypt's western-backed dictator, Husni Mubarak, is quiet – for the moment.

Banner-wavers, speakers, and scruffy youngsters mill about. But the by now world-famous square has a forlorn, leftover look, with more street people than revolutionaries. But violence still crackles like static electricity.

The government's notoriously brutal, heavily armed security police and their armored vehicles are massed nearby. In the ancient Khan al-Khalili Bazaar, I saw vanloads of government thugs waiting to attack demonstrators. Our film team, was almost arrested when we began taking photos.

Demonstrators at Tahrir showed me canisters of expended tear gas that caused some deaths and many casualties. Whether they were the usual anti-riot CS gas, or the six times stronger, carcinogenic CR that can kill or blind, I could not tell. But all the canisters were marked, "Made in the USA" and everyone knew it.

While Hillary Clinton was gushing about democracy in Egypt, shipments of US made anti-riot gear, including truncheons, gas, and rubber bullets, are being airlifted in from the US. At the same time, the US was providing money and weapons to Uzbekistan, one of the world's worst human rights offenders.

Clinton's US State Department appears to be timidly backing Egypt's revolution, at least in word. But the real power in US foreign policy, the Pentagon, is standing firmly behind Egypt's 500,000-man armed forces.

I just observed Egypt go to the polls in a series of complex parliamentary elections. The vote was remarkably clean and fair, a triumph for all Egyptians.

Two more regional polls are yet to be held, but the outcome is clear. The Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamic ally, Wasat, won over 40% of the vote. The Salafist al-Nur Party, which seeks a state run under Islamic law, won 24%. The secular Egyptian Bloc won only 13.4%.

All the preppy, upscale, youth armed with cell phones and Blackberries first seen in Tahrir that became the darlings of the western media vanished. Revolutions are made by political and economic issues, not social media.

Egyptians clearly want democracy and parliamentary government, as do people across the Arab world. They also appear to want a society that follows the tenets of Islam. How far these are to go remains uncertain.

By contrast, Egypt's mighty military-security establishment, nearly 900,000-strong, and its western backers do not: they are fighting a bitter action to slow down the development of real democracy and to safeguard their extensive privileges and power.

Officially, Egypt's military gets \$1.3 billion in US funds and arms each year. The real figure is much higher when millions more in "black" money from CIA and the Pentagon is added as well as no-charge arms and munitions transfers – in addition to \$250 million in annual economic aid.

Ever since the 1978 Camp David Accords, the US has paid Egypt some \$2 billion annually not to confront Israel. Egypt and Israel (which gets well over \$3 billion in US aid each year) together account for a third of all US foreign aid.

The US supplies all of the Egyptian military's key weapons systems and retains control of the spare parts keeping them operating. Munitions supplies are kept short so that Egypt could not wage war on Israel for more than a few days.

The most important US intelligence and security agencies maintain large stations in Cairo to protect the regime and monitor the region. Half of Egypt's food imports are financed by the US.

Many of Egypt's key generals "trained" at US military colleges and defense courses where they were vetted by CIA and DIA. Egypt's military controls at least 10% of the economy.

As with Turkey's half-million man armed forces – at least until nine years ago – Egypt's military was joined at the hip to the US defense establishment and arms industry. In exchange, Egypt agreed to become a tacit ally of Israel and a foe of the Palestinians.

Given Egypt's role as a virtual US protectorate, the flood of hypocrisy now issuing from Washington, London, Paris and Ottawa over their alleged support of Egyptian democracy is striking. For the past thirty years, these powers have ardently backed Egypt's notably ruthless, brutal dictatorship whose security forces used torture, rape, and murder to terrorize its citizens.

I've covered a lot of nasty third world dictatorships in my time. Mubarak's Egypt was one of most repressive, frightening police states I've seen. Egyptians are only now creeping out from under cover to smell the fresh air of free speech and free expression.

While Egyptians want democracy, the military wants political figureheads and the right to intervene in politics to protect its interests aka "national security" – the same demands used for decades by the rightwing Turkish military to block democracy.

Egypt's generals insist there be no investigations of human rights abuses. Washington is trying to sustain the Egypt-Israel alliance that all Egyptians detest and regard as humiliating. But none are calling for war against Israel.

The military, its US backers, Israel, and some misinformed western media warn the Muslim Brotherhood will turn Egypt into another Iran. This is most unlikely.

The Brotherhood is conservatives, timid and focused on social issues. In Egypt's political context, it is a moderate party. Egypt's Sunni Muslims have next to nothing in common with Iran's fire-and-brimstone Shia. In fact, there is a good deal of historic animosity between Iran and Egypt.

Egyptians want jobs, housing, food, education and a rescue for the deeply ailing economy, not worldwide jihad as many ill-informed westerners claim. In fact, the Brotherhood's principal rival is al-Nur's Salafists who seek a far more Islamic state under Sharia law that bans alcohol, skimpy bathing suits, and use of women's bodies to sell products.

If western powers fail to seize this historic opportunity and work with the Brotherhood's moderates, they will end up with the scimitar-wavers. This is just what occurred in Algeria in 1991 after its western-backed army crushed moderate Islamists after they won the Arab world's first clean election.

The west should begin by apologizing to Egyptians for so long sustaining Mubarak's brutal dictatorship. Next, Americans should be told the truth about their long support for sadistic Arab police states. Third, let's see America start practicing what it preaches by truly supporting democratic forces, even if we don't like what they say.