

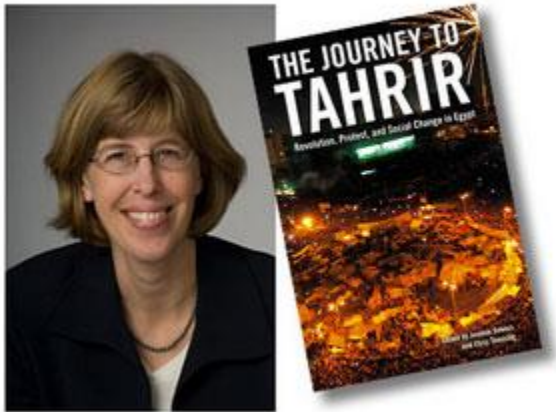
# Insights on Egypt

## Professor Jeannie Sowers Discusses the Latest Developments

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Jeannie Sowers, associate professor of political science at UNH, has conducted extensive research in and on Egypt and the Middle East. She is the editor of “The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt,” which discusses the toppling of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the beginning of a revolutionary restructuring of Egypt’s political and social order that is still under way. UNH Today asked Sowers to provide us some insights on what is happening now and what the future might hold for the Arab world’s most populous nation.

**Can you help UNH Today readers understand what is happening in Egypt and why it is so significant?**

Egypt has by far the largest population in the Arab world, and developments in Cairo have long been seen as a bellwether for the region as a whole. The Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 were momentous. Millions of ordinary people took to the streets to protest corruption, repression, and lack of economic opportunity. The result was the ousting, in short order, of long-ruling dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya (the last with NATO's help, of course). Bahrain's uprising might have gone the same way, but was put

down with the import of Saudi troops. Not surprisingly, Bahrainis are still protesting.

One of the key factors in whether popular uprisings led to regime change was the stance of the military. In Egypt in 2011, the military declared itself neutral, deposed Mubarak, and took temporary control. In 2011 and 2012, Egypt held its first openly competitive parliamentary and presidential elections since Gamal Abdel Nasser took power in a military coup in 1952. While the Muslim Brotherhood did well, which was expected given its extensive social and political organization, the liberals were split between many competing parties, and still pulled 20 percent of the vote. But the real surprise was strength of the salafi parties, groups that generally espouse more conservative cultural and social values than the Brotherhood. So approximately two-thirds of the parliamentary vote went to "Islamist"-affiliated parties. You can't forget or ignore this, or pretend that somehow they are not representative. But this is exactly what the military is trying to claim.

The massacres of Islamist protesters last week by the Egyptian military and security forces are unprecedented in their scale and ferocity in modern Egyptian politics. More people have died than in the whole two years of the Egyptian uprising. It was bad enough that the military stepped in, on the back of large-scale protests against the elected president, to stage a coup. With these killings, however, the Egyptian military has now polarized the situation beyond any simple compromise. What is even more troubling is that these massacres are being justified by the state and private media as a necessary campaign against "terrorists," even though the sit-ins by supporters Muslim Brotherhood were ordinary civilians. The military has already reinstated the hated emergency law that deprives citizens of basic civil liberties, and was used for the three decades under the Mubarak regime to stifle dissent.

### **What are your thoughts about the response from the United States and international community so far?**

The responsibility for what is taking place falls squarely on Egypt's leaderships, in the military first and foremost for the killings and with the Brotherhood for not realizing how far the military would go. The United States and the European Union wisely tried very hard to bring the parties together as tensions escalated, repeatedly trying before and after the military coup on July 3 to broker a deal between representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, on the one hand, and the generals, particularly al-Sisi, to no avail. As Senators McCain and Graham discovered when they went to Cairo, the generals weren't really interested in a compromise. The military were after taking down the Brotherhood, and they mobilized all the machinery of the state and the media to wage a propaganda war. Just as in the United States, the media can powerfully shape people's understandings, and some media outlets routinely distort basic facts. When the military chose to shoot civilians en masse at the peaceful sit-ins organized by the pro-Morsi supporters, however, then the United States should have acted decisively to cut military aid. The United States has proven, quite clearly, that it failed to have any influence over the decision-making of the generals. If there are no consequences to their choices, then it is basically a green light to go on as they have.

You have conducted extensive research about Egypt and its democracy movement. What are your thoughts on the outcome of this situation? Are you optimistic?

I don't think anyone inside or outside Egypt is optimistic right now. What worries me most is the widespread popular acquiescence to the re-emergence of the old police state. People are tired of a lack of security, frightened by the dire economic circumstances, and frustrated by the lack of progress. However, if we look further ahead, I can find some grounds for change. The generals are promising to make better on security and the economy, but cannot deliver any more than Mubarak could, because the state itself is in fiscal crisis, cannot deliver on basic services, and the private sector is in free-fall. So quite quickly I expect their popularity will wane. The Brotherhood and other parties may also realize that they cannot hope to appeal to many Egyptians without a long, hard look at some of the issues they prioritized, and their inability to reach out and compromise with other sectors of the population. Of course, we have political parties in the United States that have found it difficult to reach beyond their base, so to expect the Brotherhood to do this quickly may be overly optimistic in light of the violence meted out to them.

What would be your policy recommendations on how to resolve this situation?

U.S. leverage is limited, as noted above. But cutting military aid, which would deprive the Egyptian military of cash to buy sophisticated U.S. weaponry, is an easy, low-hanging fruit that sends a clear message. There are some contractual issues for the United States with its own defense contractors, as Egypt can order U.S. weapons systems in advance based on the expectation of future U.S. aid disbursements. More significantly, several important U.S. allies are lobbying hard for the United States to keep funding the Egyptian military – namely, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as others such as the United Arab Emirates. These countries believe the military represents stability and a return to the status quo of years before the uprisings. But what these countries have not realized is that popular discontent is not going to go away, and worse, the military's treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood is making Egypt much less stable right now and Egyptian society much more polarized than ever before.

You can read more on what scholars of Egypt think about Egypt now at [Middle East Report's blog](#).

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