

TELECONFERENCE WITH JON ALTERMAN

January 25, 2012

Speaker Bio: Jon B. Alterman is director and senior fellow of the Middle East Program at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS, he served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. Department of State and as a special assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. He is a member of the Chief of Naval Operations Executive Panel and served as an expert adviser to the Iraq Study Group (also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission). In addition to his policy work, Alterman teaches Middle Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and George Washington University. Before entering government, he was a scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace and at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 1993 to 1997, Alterman was an award-winning teacher at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in history. He also worked as a legislative aide to Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY).

Teleconference Summary:

Alterman began his remarks noting that he had recently completed a trip to Egypt to serve as an observer of the second round of the Egyptian parliamentary elections. Following the election, Alterman traveled to rural areas in Egypt, including the birthplace of the Muslim brotherhood.

Despite the fact that the majority of parliamentary seats were won by Islamic political party members, Alterman does not believe that the election was driven by religious ideology. Rather, the election was about starting anew; expanding freedoms and personal liberties, while addressing longstanding populous frustrations that reforms had only benefited the rich, but failed to address the needs of the middle and lower class.

Alterman noted that when he traveled outside of Cairo, Islamic parties controlled the political debate. There was virtually no presence of secular parties outside of the Egyptian capital. The societal construct of these parts of the country are still largely influenced by teachings of Islam, which was made even more apparent by the parliamentary election results. In discussing education, Alterman speculated that less-educated individuals had more traditional views than better educated citizens. In his opinion, the two major Islamic parties, Freedom and Justice Party (which is political party of the Muslim Brotherhood) and the Al-Nour party, had formed a de facto non-aggression pact, and had worked together before and during the elections. In Egypt, these two parties are by far the best organized. As it stands now, there is no well-organized secular opposition in Egypt.

Alterman stressed that the next six months will remain quite uncertain. There are a number of elections ahead, including votes on the upper house of parliament, president, and for a new constitution. It seems that the generals currently in power are struggling to determine the best strategy moving forward with the elections. Much of their wariness is the result of widespread criticism of their handling of the elections and the slow pace at which they are unfolding.

In regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mr. Alterman reasoned that even though there is no imminent risk of an armed confrontation, Egypt would most likely respond with force in the

event that violence escalates. That being said, the most immediate concern for the Egyptians remains economic development and recovery.

Currently, there is no official U.S. economic policy vis-à-vis Egypt. There is limited trust. It seems, however, that the Muslim Brotherhood is using the U.S. Embassy in Egypt as a way to access the IMF. There is an apparent trust issue, which has made maintaining positive diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Egypt difficult on several levels.

Mr. Alterman made a number of recommendations:

1. Focus on the long-term goals as opposed to short-term solutions.
2. Support the consolidation of democratic institutions.
3. Serve as a mediator for Egypt, Israel and Turkey.
4. Assist Egypt's government with the creation of a National Security Policy.
5. Begin working toward the eventual goal of signing a U.S.-Egypt FTA.