

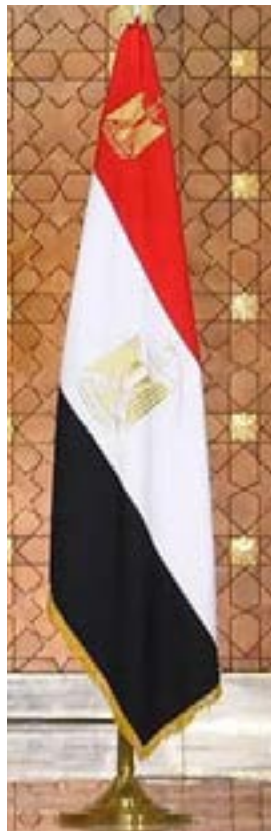
# The United States and Egypt

## Updating an Obsolete Relationship

Amy Hawthorne and Andrew Miller

September 2020

Excerpted from *Re-engaging the Middle East: A New Vision for U.S. Policy*



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## ABOUT THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY (POMED)

**THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. Through dialogue, research and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East. POMED publications offer original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. The views expressed in POMED publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED or the members of its Board of Directors. For more information, please contact Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne at [amy.hawthorne@pomed.org](mailto:amy.hawthorne@pomed.org).

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## INTRODUCTION

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In Egypt, as in several other places in the Middle East, the United States is overinvested in a country (1) whose importance to the United States has declined in recent decades, but which Washington cannot afford to ignore; (2) that often is not an effective or willing partner in advancing U.S. priorities; and (3) whose government's repression and poor economic management pose significant threats to stability and thus to U.S. interests. For these reasons, the next U.S. administration should change course and craft a more constructive policy toward Egypt.

A new U.S. president should resist the temptation to keep the relationship on autopilot or even to deepen ties with an Egyptian regime that may be less stable than it seems and, in any event, is unlikely to help advance U.S. regional policies to a degree that justifies condoning its troubling governance record. Instead, the United States should adopt a more conditional and transactional approach to generate more leverage over Egypt

than it has at present. Such a policy shift, however, will require overcoming several challenges that have stymied previous U.S. administrations with regard to Egypt.

One such challenge is persuading overburdened and risk-averse policymakers to change course with a country that, compared to other Arab states, is not in immediate crisis. Another is finding ways to reduce and refocus one of the largest U.S. foreign aid packages without risking Egyptian cooperation on U.S. security interests. A third challenge is figuring out how to influence the governance of a regime that depends, to a certain extent, on U.S. support, but often has proven to be resistant to external pressure. This chapter, which assumes that Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al Sisi will still be in power in 2021, describes core American interests in Egypt, reviews recent U.S. policy there, and explains how the United States should recalibrate a relationship that, in its present form, has outlived its usefulness.



## INTERESTS

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Since the mid-1970s, when Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat decided to pivot toward the West and pursue peace with Israel, U.S. officials have accorded Egypt a central place in policy toward the Middle East. Egypt's special status has earned it nearly US\$80 billion in U.S. military and civilian aid since the late 1970s, regular high-level visits from Washington, and diplomatic support, including effusive rhetoric about the country's importance as a "strategic partner."<sup>1</sup>

The heavy investment in Egypt has been predicated on a belief that U.S.-Egyptian cooperation serves three core national-security interests. One such interest is Arab-Israeli peace. Since brokering the Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel in 1979, the United States has urged Egypt to uphold its treaty commitments, as well as sought Egyptian help to achieve a U.S.-led settlement to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>2</sup> A second core interest is counterterrorism (CT) cooperation. For decades, Egypt has been a crucial node in the international jihadist movement. Egyptians have played prominent roles in terrorist attacks against local, regional, and U.S. targets—inter alia, Egyptian members of al Qaeda were central actors in the 9/11 attacks—leading the United States to prioritize intelligence-sharing and other CT coordination with Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The third main security interest is gaining from Egypt reliable and fast military access through its territory and airspace, specifically for U.S. naval vessels sailing

through the Suez Canal and for U.S. military aircraft flying over Egypt (so-called overflight privileges) as they transit to destinations such as East Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

*Because of Egypt's demographic and geographic significance, prolonged instability there could have negative security ramifications not only inside Egypt but also beyond its borders, such as mass migration outflows, weapons proliferation, and empowered militant groups, not to mention destabilizing political effects.*

The United States also has sought to bolster stability in Egypt as an overarching goal seen as necessary to protect the security interests described above.<sup>5</sup> Egyptian stability has been considered important because the country has the Middle East and North Africa's largest population (100 million citizens) and its largest armed forces, and because it occupies a strategic location—it borders Israel, has a long Mediterranean coastline, sits across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia, and is home to the Suez Canal. Because of Egypt's demographic and geographic significance, prolonged instability there could have negative

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1. Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, November 21, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>

2. Ibid.

3. See *inter alia* Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2006).

4. Jim Michaels, "U.S. Military Needs Egypt for Access to Critical Area," *USA Today*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/08/17/egypt-morsi-obama-hagel-gulf-heritage-brookings/2665903/>

5. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations."



security ramifications not only inside Egypt but also beyond its borders, such as mass migration outflows, weapons proliferation, and empowered militant groups, not to mention destabilizing political effects.

This traditional view of Egypt is not entirely wrong: the U.S. government still has an interest in the country's security and stability. Yet, in continuing to present Cairo as a vital strategic partner, American officials are exaggerating Egypt's current importance to the United States and its contributions to advancing U.S. interests. Egypt is no longer the predominant Arab political player it was in decades past. Its ability to advance U.S. regional goals has diminished, due to changes in the global economy, regional power shifts, and domestic problems that have kept its leaders' attention often focused inward during the past decade.

Over the past decade, Egypt has been outstripped in regional influence by several much smaller and much wealthier Gulf countries. These oil monarchies are eroding Egypt's traditional role as a main go-between with Israel by forging direct (if as yet unofficial) relations with the Jewish state based on a common desire for the aggressive containment of Iran. (Egypt does not share the Gulf states' threat perception on Iran.)<sup>6</sup> The Suez Canal has become somewhat less critical as a global transit route as trade patterns have changed and new means of conveyance, particularly for energy, have been developed.<sup>7</sup> In addition, with the United

States winding down its "forever wars" in western Asia, the U.S. military's demand for access to Egyptian airspace is likely to ebb considerably.

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Egypt also has proved a difficult partner even in those areas where it retains influence. Egypt has been a less-than-enthusiastic participant in Washington's regional peace initiatives, too preoccupied with its own interests to engage rigorously on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, Egypt has rebuffed U.S. proposals for closer CT cooperation in the Sinai Peninsula, where it faces a persistent jihadist insurgency, and on the border with Libya. It also has rejected Washington's warnings that its CT approach, revolving around mass repression and indiscriminate military tactics that have harmed many civilians, is counterproductive.<sup>9</sup>

And while Egypt wants unconditional support from the United States, it does not always feel a corresponding obligation to cooperate on certain issues important to Washington. Over U.S. protestations, Egypt has pursued closer ties with American adversaries such as China, Russia, and

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6. Andrew Miller and Richard Sokolsky, "Actually, Egypt Is a Terrible Ally," *New York Times*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/opinion/united-states-egypt-pence.html>

7. Eddy Bekkers, Joseph Francois, and Hugo Rojas-Romagosa, "Melting Ice Caps Will Open the Northern Sea to Commercial Traffic and Change World Trade Patterns," *LSE Business Review*, August 8, 2018, <https://blogs.se.ac.uk/businessreview/2018/08/08/melting-ice-caps-will-open-the-northern-sea-to-commercial-traffic-and-change-world-trade-patterns/>

8. Aidan Lewis, "Sisi Says Egypt Will Not Accept Anything against Palestinian Wishes," Reuters, June 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mideast-egypt/sisi-says-egypt-will-not-accept-anything-against-palestinian-wishes-idUSKCN1T3OSP>

9. Miller and Sokolsky, "Actually, Egypt Is a Terrible Ally."

North Korea.<sup>10</sup> It has obstructed U.S.-funded aid programs designed to help Egyptian citizens.<sup>11</sup> Most alarming for a supposed “strategic partner,” Egypt under al Sisi has wrongly imprisoned and mistreated numerous U.S. citizens for political reasons, and in January 2020, an unjustly detained American, Mustafa Kassem, even died in custody after Egyptian authorities ignored repeated U.S. requests for his release on humanitarian grounds.<sup>12</sup>

The unfortunate reality of Egypt today is that its regime’s approach to political and economic governance, perhaps more than any other factor, is increasing the probability of instability there. Al Sisi’s brutally repressive rule has worsened the very problems of widespread disaffection that sparked the 2011 popular uprising against longtime U.S. partner President Hosni Mubarak.<sup>13</sup> On the economic front, the situation is equally bleak for average Egyptians. In accordance with a 2016-19 International Monetary Fund (IMF) program, al Sisi imposed fiscal reforms that, while improving the macroeconomic picture to a certain extent, have severely worsened living conditions for most Egyptians.<sup>14</sup> Today, nearly a third of Egyptians live below the poverty line—even more than before

the IMF program began—and some 30 percent (maybe more) of younger working-age Egyptians are unemployed.<sup>15</sup> Al Sisi also has significantly expanded the role of the military in the economy, increasing cronyism and corruption and crowding out the private sector, the most viable source of sustained job creation.<sup>16</sup>

*The unfortunate reality of Egypt today is that its regime’s approach to political and economic governance, perhaps more than any other factor, is increasing the probability of instability there.*

A former minister of defense who seized power through a 2013 coup and then ruthlessly crushed Egypt’s nascent pluralistic politics, al Sisi has overseen the unjust detention of tens of thousands of citizens, a sharp rise in state torture and extrajudicial killings, the subordination of all civilian state institutions to his security agencies, and the closing off of space for independent

10. Michal Wahid Hanna and Daniel Benaim, “Egypt First,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2018-01-04/egypt-first>

11. Amy Hawthorne, “Rethinking U.S. Economic Aid to Egypt,” Project on Middle East Democracy, October 2016, <https://pomed.org/report-rethinking-u-s-economic-aid-to-egypt/>; Julian Pecquet, “U.S. Shifts Egypt Aid to Other Countries,” *Al-Monitor*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/10/us-shift-egypt-aid-other-countries.html>

12. Sudarsan Raghavan, “Egypt Jails American Traveler, Saying She Criticized the Government on Facebook,” *Washington Post*, August 8, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/egypt-jails-american-traveler-saying-she-criticized-the-government-on-facebook/2019/08/08/71725ce6-b85d-11e9-aeb2-a101a1fb27a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/egypt-jails-american-traveler-saying-she-criticized-the-government-on-facebook/2019/08/08/71725ce6-b85d-11e9-aeb2-a101a1fb27a7_story.html)

13. Amy Hawthorne and Andrew Miller, “Worse than Mubarak,” *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/27/worse-than-mubarak/>

14. Andrew Miller, “Egypt: Security, Human Rights, and Reform,” Testimony: U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee Hearing, July 24, 2018, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20180724/108598/HHRG-115-FA13-Wstate-MillerA-20180724.pdf>

15. “Sources: Officials Delayed Survey Results Showing Egyptians Face Highest Poverty Rate since 2000,” *Mada Masr*, July 30, 2019, <https://madamasr.com/en/2019/07/30/feature/economy/sources-officials-delayed-survey-results-showing-egyptians-face-highest-poverty-rate-since-2000/>; “Unemployment, Youth Total,” World Bank, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS>

16. Reuters Staff, “From War Room to Boardroom. Military Firms Flourish in Sisi’s Egypt,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-military-economy-specialreport/special-report-from-war-room-to-boardroom-military-firms-flourish-in-sisis-egypt-idUSKCN1IH185>

politics and media.<sup>17</sup> This unprecedented violence and repression, carried out in the name of Egypt's "security" and subsidized by U.S. taxpayers, not only deeply offends American values, it may also worsen Egypt's terrorism problem, which is currently serious but manageable, by enlarging the pool of aggrieved citizens susceptible to anti-regime and anti-U.S. radicalization.<sup>18</sup> And separate from fueling the terrorist threat, al Sisi's rule by fear and force may plant the seeds of popular resentment that could lead to an upheaval, possibly violent, against Egypt's powerholders. Without a course correction in governance and economic policy, serious instability could be in store.

To be sure, a sustained period of regime-shaking unrest in Egypt is a low-probability scenario, and the United States has a poor track record anyway of predicting when Arab regimes will go off the rails. But because some key ingredients for instability are present, and because such a scenario would have ramifications for U.S. interests, it should be taken seriously and warrants attention and planning. Indeed, surprise street protests in Egypt in fall 2019, fueled by public anger over economic hardship, revelations of al Sisi's alleged corruption, and mass repression, remind us that the popular support for al Sisi, and the country's stability, may be more precarious than it looks and shakier than what Egyptian officials claim.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Miller, "Egypt: Security, Human Rights, and Reform."

18. Amy Woodyatt, "Egypt's Prisons Are Becoming Recruiting Grounds for the Islamic State," *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/08/egypts-prisons-are-becoming-recruiting-grounds-for-the-islamic-state/>

19. Vivian Yee and Nada Rashwan, "In Egypt, Scattered Protests Break Out for Second Week," *New York Times*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/middleeast/egypt-protests.html>

## POLICY BACKGROUND

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While core U.S. security interests in Egypt have remained constant over many decades, other aspects of the relationship have fluctuated, at least since the George W. Bush administration. One such aspect is how large a role the United States has sought for Egypt in regional initiatives such as Israeli-Palestinian negotiations or the campaign against ISIS. Typically, U.S. administrations have started off with ambitious hopes for Egypt to play a pivotal regional role, but as time has gone on, have diminished their expectations in the face of Egypt's lack of interest or capability. Another fluctuating aspect is the degree of importance that the United States has attached to the governance and human rights situation in Egypt and the ways in which it has engaged the Egyptian government on this issue.

Here, there have been two main schools of thought. The first sees giving Egypt's leadership a close embrace—by providing unconditional foreign aid, offering steady public praise and diplomatic attention, and avoiding public (and sometimes also private) criticism—as necessary to support regime stability and to protect security cooperation. Adherents to the second school of thought view authoritarian rule as posing a serious risk to Egypt's stability (as well as with U.S. values), and believe that playing hardball—by using various forms of U.S. influence to compel Egypt to improve its human rights record and to govern more democratically, as well as by building ties with Egyptians outside regime circles—is the most effective approach to manage this risk. Underlying each approach are different understandings of American influence in Egypt. Does American

influence derive from unwavering demonstrations that the United States will always be in the regime's corner, no matter how it behaves domestically, or from incentives for cooperation that Washington can create by providing or withholding aid and other forms of U.S. influence?

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President Barack Obama's policy toward Egypt started out with the close-embrace approach, then moved toward a hardball approach, and ended up as an often-confusing mix of both. His policy was shaped, and ultimately defined, by developments inside Egypt that his administration did not anticipate. At the outset of his presidency, Obama sought to repair ties with Mubarak, after bilateral relations had been strained by the preceding administration's Freedom Agenda and invasion of Iraq.<sup>20</sup> In his first two years in office, Obama avoided public criticism of Mubarak's repression, honored Mubarak by choosing Cairo as the venue for his landmark 2009 speech on U.S.-Islamic world relations, and sought to resolve disagreements over aid that had vexed the relationship during the Bush administration.<sup>21</sup> Obama intuitively understood that the Middle East's authoritarian regimes were unsustainable, and in 2010 his national security staff conducted a study on the

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20. Peter Grier, "Obama, Mubarak Seek Fresh Start to Strained U.S.-Egypt Ties," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 19, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2009/0819/p02s04-usfp.html>

21. "The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning," White House, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>

prospects for political and economic reform in the Arab world. But the Obama administration operated on the assumption that Mubarak's Egypt was largely stable for the time being.

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This assumption, of course, was upended by the sudden outbreak in January 2011 of mass protests against Mubarak and for democracy and social justice. Obama's secretaries of state and defense counseled caution in jettisoning a long-standing American partner facing a popular rebellion. But Obama quickly soured on Mubarak's stubborn refusal to meet the protestors' demands and was appalled by his use of violence to quash peaceful demonstrations, leading the U.S. president to vocally back the mostly youthful Egyptians bravely massing in Cairo's Tahrir Square. As Mubarak's hold on power was weakening, Obama sided with those advisers who argued that the United States should be "on the right side of history" and back a democratic opening.<sup>22</sup>

After the Egyptian military forced out Mubarak in February 2011, Obama reset U.S. policy, at least

rhetorically, to support a democratic transition and to accept the Egyptian people's electoral choices—so long as any newly elected Egyptian leadership continued to uphold core U.S. security interests.<sup>23</sup> Recognizing that years of deference to Mubarak and erroneous assumptions of regime stability had left the U.S. government with poor contacts among Egyptian opposition forces and civil society, the administration swiftly built relations with the newly legal Muslim Brotherhood and reached out to other ascendant or emerging political movements and civic groups.<sup>24</sup> But concerns that pushing hard on democracy would jeopardize security cooperation with Egypt, skepticism inside the U.S. government about the wisdom of or need for promoting democratic change in Arab countries, and exasperation with Egypt's tumultuous and exhausting post-Mubarak political transition soon dampened U.S. enthusiasm for a genuine pro-democracy policy reorientation. Throughout the first two years of the post-Mubarak transition, the Obama administration largely deferred to both successive Egyptian governments, the first led on a transitional basis by the military and the second by the freely elected Muslim Brotherhood. During this period, the United States did not seek to obstruct democratic change in Egypt. But Obama ultimately was unwilling to exert substantial pressure on Egypt in response to undemocratic moves, such as the military's repeated violence against peaceful protestors, the unjust prosecution of American democracy workers beginning in 2011,<sup>25</sup> or the Brotherhood government's late 2012

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22. Liz Halloran and Ari Shapiro, "Obama: U.S. Is 'On Right Side of History' in Mideast," NPR, February 15, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/15/133779423/obama-u-s-is-on-right-side-of-history-in-mideast>

23. "Clinton Supports 'Full Transition' in Egypt," Al Jazeera, July 14, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/7/15/clinton-supports-full-transition-in-egypt>

24. Tim Mak, "U.S. Recognizes Muslim Brotherhood," *Politico*, June 30, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/06/us-recognizes-muslim-brotherhood-058094>

25. Josh Levs and Saad Abedine, "Egypt Sentences American NGO Workers to Jail," CNN, June 4, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/04/world/africa/egypt-ngos/index.html>; Amy Hawthorne, "What the United States Should Have Said to Egypt About the NGO Trial," MENA Source, Atlantic Council, June 6, 2013, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-the-united-states-should-have-said-to-egypt-about-the-ngo-trial/>

attempt to consolidate power amid an outcry by large numbers of Egyptians.<sup>26</sup>

While the Obama White House tried to discourage a military coup against Egypt's first democratically elected president, Morsi of the Brotherhood, other parts of the U.S. government did not give such a clear red light. The administration reluctantly accepted his July 2013 military overthrow, fearing that strongly opposing it would alienate Egypt's military and harm U.S. security interests. This time, the U.S. government sought to be more involved in the details of the transition than it had been after Mubarak's ouster, developing milestones for Egypt's return to a civilian, democratic government, but it was unwilling to apply real pressure in support of these goals. It was not until after Egypt's security forces massacred nearly a thousand Morsi supporters gathered in Cairo in August 2013 that the administration took a punitive step, withholding the delivery of several expensive weapons systems funded by U.S. foreign assistance.<sup>27</sup> The impact of this partial arms suspension, seen by many in Egypt and Washington as a woefully inadequate response to the coup and the killing, was almost immediately undercut by senior administration officials arguing for releasing some or all of these weapons. The Egyptian government appeared to calculate (correctly) that with enough complaining to Washington, and pressure from al Sisi's backers in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, the United States would blink first.<sup>28</sup>

When Obama eventually decided to release the suspended arms shipments in March 2015, the al Sisi government had fulfilled virtually none of the terms on which the United States had conditioned

the delivery of the weapons, including, most important, "credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government," though Obama did announce important changes to the U.S. military aid program at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Bilateral ties, which had been strained because of the arms suspension and the administration's vocal criticism of al Sisi's mass human rights violations, did not recover in the final two years of Obama's presidency. Indeed, the U.S. president kept his distance both from al Sisi, meeting him only once and pointedly never inviting him to the White House, and from Egypt in general. Focused on negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran and fighting ISIS, Obama simply did not regard Egypt as a foreign policy priority.

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The Obama administration, in the final analysis, struggled in how to respond to post-Mubarak Egypt. It tended to vacillate between applying modest pressure on the Egyptian government in the service of defending human rights, and accommodating the existing power structure for fear of jeopardizing U.S. security interests. In the span of Obama's tenure, U.S. policy swung from one extreme to the other, from deferring to Egypt's authoritarian government to withholding

26. Peter Beaumont, "Morsi 'Power Grab' Angers Egypt Opposition Groups," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/23/morsi-power-grab-angers-opposition>

27. Elise Labott, "U.S. Suspends Significant Military Aid to Egypt," CNN, October 9, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/09/world/meast/us-egypt-aid/index.html>

28. David D. Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East* (New York: Viking, 2018), 298–330.

29. Peter Baker, "Obama Removes Weapons Freeze Against Egypt," *New York Times*, March 31, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/01/world/middleeast/obama-lifts-arms-freeze-against-egypt.html>

military aid over human rights violations, and finally caving on its conditions for the resumption of assistance. This approach too often left the United States with the worst of both worlds, doing enough to antagonize the Egyptian leadership, but not persevering with a harder line long enough to apply the degree of pressure that could potentially change its calculus. To be sure, it was always going to be difficult to persuade Egypt to modify its policies on matters it deemed existential—those that it saw as jeopardizing its own grip on power—irrespective of what posture the United States adopted. But there were some moments, such as immediately after the ousters of Mubarak and Morsi, where it seems possible that more could have been done. And, in hindsight, it appears that concerns about losing Egyptian cooperation on core U.S. interests during this period were overblown, suggesting that the Obama administration was too cautious.

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President Donald Trump entered office with a completely different attitude toward Egypt and its general-cum-president, reinforced by what seemed to be a compulsion to overturn Obama's policies. It appeared that Trump, who met with the Egyptian president in New York weeks before the 2016 election, admired al Sisi for the very qualities

that Obama had disdained: his authoritarianism, brutality, and obsession with power.<sup>30</sup> Senior officials in the Trump administration, including the first national security adviser Michael Flynn and then Secretary of Defense James Mattis, also viewed Egypt as strategically more important than did the Obama administration and regarded al Sisi's mass repression as an effective CT policy—or even as necessary to keep Egypt stable.<sup>31</sup> Adding to Egypt's enhanced reputation in the Trump administration was the view of the Israeli-Palestinian “peace” team, led by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, that Egyptian support for Trump's “deal of the century” was essential to compel the Palestinians to make major concessions.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Trump's closest regional partners—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—lobbied hard for strong U.S. backing of al Sisi.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Trump favored an unconditional embrace of al Sisi, likely hoping that blanket U.S. support for the ex-general would guarantee Egyptian cooperation on the administration's agenda and bolster Egypt as a pro-Trump ally. In April 2017, Trump received al Sisi as one of his first foreign counterparts in the Oval Office, the very honor denied to the latter by Obama, and lavished the Egyptian dictator with praise, saying he was doing “a fantastic job” and that “we are very much behind Egypt.”<sup>33</sup> The regular public condemnations of al Sisi's rights abuses during the Obama administration were gone, replaced with anodyne praise for Egypt's supposedly pivotal role in the Middle East. Al Sisi apparently believed that the Trump administration would accede to its demands that the Obama administration had refused, such as designating the Brotherhood as a Foreign

30. Cristiano Lima, “Trump Praises Egypt's al Sisi: ‘He's a Fantastic Guy,’” *Politico*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/trump-praises-egypts-al-sisi-hes-a-fantastic-guy-228560>

31. David Kirkpatrick, “The White House and the Strongman,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/27/sunday-review/obama-egypt-coup-trump.html>

32. Peter Baker and Declan Walsh, “Trump Shifts Course on Egypt, Praising Its Authoritarian Leader,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/world/middleeast/-egypt-sisi-trump-white-house.html>

33. *Ibid.*



Terrorist Organization or canceling Obama's 2015 reforms to military aid. Despite the White House's exceedingly warm reception of al Sisi, however, the Trump administration did not immediately grant all Egyptian requests—and even briefly took action on certain human rights issues. Shortly after al Sisi's visit, Trump secured the release of a U.S. citizen unjustly imprisoned in Egypt, humanitarian worker Aya Hijazi, and her husband. Though Trump likely was more interested in one-upping Obama than in promoting civil society freedoms, Hijazi's release was still a notable step. In August 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made an unusual punitive move by suspending or cutting nearly US\$300 million in aid to Egypt. This move was intended to compel Cairo to end its military cooperation with North Korea, to withdraw a law imposing draconian restrictions on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and to overturn the 2013 sham convictions of American democracy workers.<sup>34</sup>

The Trump administration's pro-Egypt rhetoric and actions began to converge more closely when Michael Pompeo, who as a member of Congress had been a harsh critic of Obama and the Muslim Brotherhood, replaced Tillerson. In July 2018, Pompeo released the military aid suspended by Tillerson, even though al Sisi had only partly met the attached conditions.<sup>35</sup> In April 2019, Trump once again welcomed the Egyptian president to the White House, and this time al Sisi had a more fruitful visit. At his urging, Trump instructed his administration to explore

designating the Brotherhood, launching a process that was continuing as of this writing.<sup>36</sup> Al Sisi's lobbying of Trump on Libya also reportedly was instrumental in persuading the U.S. president to back the renegade warlord and Egyptian ally Khalifa Haftar's April 2019 assault on Tripoli.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most important, in inviting al Sisi into the Oval Office shortly before his regime staged a phony referendum on authoritarian constitutional amendments that would allow al Sisi to stay in office through at least 2030, Trump provided the Egyptian dictator with a clear endorsement of his power grab.<sup>38</sup>

*The Suez Canal has become somewhat less critical as a global transit route as trade patterns have changed and new means of conveyance, particularly for energy, have been developed.*

Yet, Trump's rapprochement with Egypt, hugging al Sisi close while withholding criticism, has largely failed to yield dividends for U.S. interests. Contrary to those who argued that Egypt would reciprocate positive gestures from Washington, Cairo has tended to pocket concessions from the United States. For example, following his 2017 Oval Office meeting, al Sisi proceeded to ratify the aforementioned NGO law, breaking a pledge

34. Andrew Miller and Todd Ruffner, "President Trump's Second Foreign Affairs Budget," Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2018, <https://pomed.org/fy19-budget-report/>

35. Andrew Miller, Seth Binder, and Louisa Keeler, "President Trump's Third Foreign Affairs Budget," Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2019, <https://pomed.org/fy20-budget-report/>

36. Eric Schmitt, Helene Cooper, Edward Wong, and Charlie Savage, "On Muslim Brotherhood, Trump Weighs Siding with Autocrats and Roiling Middle East," *New York Times*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/world/middleeast/muslim-brotherhood-trump.html>

37. Vivian Salama, Jared Malsin, and Summer Said, "Trump Backed Libyan Warlord after Saudi Arabia and Egypt Lobbied Him," *Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-backed-libyan-warlord-after-saudi-arabia-and-egypt-lobbied-him-11557668581>

38. Margaret Talev, "Trump Praises Egypt's al Sisi Amid Efforts to Extend Rule," *Bloomberg*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-09/trump-says-he-doesn-t-oppose-el-sisi-s-effort-to-extend-his-rule>



to Trump's aides to shelve the legislation.<sup>39</sup> Nor has Egypt given the administration fulsome public support for its Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal. And on the eve of al Sisi's 2019 visit to the White House, Cairo even withdrew from Trump's Middle East Strategic Alliance, a regional collective security initiative sponsored by the United States and a cornerstone of the administration's anti-Iran policy.<sup>40</sup>

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Making matters worse, the Trump administration's practice of relying on public praise and private diplomacy to address (a very limited number of) human rights concerns has been ineffective. Since Trump took office, al Sisi has tightened his grip and escalated his repression (including arresting several more U.S. citizens). Seemingly buoyed by

Trump's effusive, unconditional support, al Sisi is doubling down on the very approaches that risk sowing instability. Underscoring the fundamental flaw in Trump's embrace of al Sisi, it was only when the administration—with a push from key members of Congress—was prepared to apply pressure on Egypt by suspending military aid that al Sisi made a more serious effort to address U.S. priorities, such as by finally exonerating the wrongly convicted democracy workers and reducing some cooperation with the North Korean regime.<sup>41</sup> If the Obama administration's use of military aid as leverage appeared inconclusive, Tillerson's wielding of this tool proved its efficacy. As of this writing, however, Trump seemed determined to go in the opposite direction and draw ever closer to al Sisi, reportedly even calling the Egyptian strongman his "favorite dictator," despite the clear evidence that this approach will not work.<sup>42</sup> A tragic case in point was the January 2020 death in Egyptian custody of Mustafa Kassem, the wrongly imprisoned American citizen. Although Kassem wrote a letter to Trump pleading for the United States to gain his release, and senior U.S. officials did raise his case, the U.S. president apparently failed to intervene personally on Kassem's behalf.<sup>43</sup>

39. Noha Elhennawy, "Some Egyptian Rights Activists Dismiss Country's New NGO Law," Associated Press, August 22, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/acb7b6b20078424e8b0598b7d6c645f2>

40. Stephen Kalin and Jonathan Landay, "Egypt Withdraws from U.S.-Led Anti-Iran Security Initiative," Reuters, April 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mesa-egypt-exclusive/exclusive-egypt-withdraws-from-u-s-led-anti-iran-security-initiative-sources-idUSKCN1RM2WU>

41. Andrew Miller, "Trump Blinks and Egypt's Sisi Wins," *Foreign Policy*, August 10, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/10/trump-blinks-and-egypts-sisi-wins/>

42. Nancy A. Youssef, Vivian Salama, and Michael C. Bender, "Trump, Awaiting Egyptian Counterpart at Summit, Called Out for 'My Favorite Dictator,'" *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-awaiting-egyptian-counterpart-at-summit-called-out-for-my-favorite-dictator-11568403645>

43. Declan Walsh, "American Held in Egypt Prison Dies After a Hunger Strike," *New York Times*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/world/middleeast/egypt-prisoner-moustafa-kassen-dies.html>

## POLICY CHALLENGES

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After the turmoil in Egypt and the vacillations in U.S. policy over the past decade, the policy questions that will confront the next administration are fundamental and strategic. A new president will have a chance to update U.S. policy toward Egypt to reflect better the reality of that country and the bilateral relationship, an opportunity that must be seized. A new approach will have to grapple with three primary questions.

What role should the United States give Egypt in its broader Middle East strategy? The official U.S. government view of Egypt has not changed much over the last forty-plus years. According to senior U.S. officials, Egypt remains a “key partner of the United States in the Arab world.”<sup>44</sup> But, as argued above, Egypt is no longer the regional power on which the “strategic relationship” was originally premised. And the interests of both countries have begun to diverge in important respects, particularly concerning the role of Russia and the most effective way to counter the spread of violent extremism. Yet, U.S. support for Egypt has remained intact.

Defining Egypt’s place in U.S. regional strategy is not just a theoretical exercise. It has direct implications for the U.S. policy agenda in Egypt and the region, for other partnerships, and for resource commitments. Policies that depend on Egypt’s ability to rally the Arab world to the U.S. position have become ever more tenuous. A recognition that Egypt is not capable of contributing (or willing to contribute) as much to American interests as it once did also increases the imperative to find more capable partners. And, if Egypt has become less

central to U.S. goals in the Middle East, it is harder for the U.S. government to justify providing Egypt with the third-largest U.S. foreign aid package in the world.<sup>45</sup> A new president will need to wrestle with the fact of Egypt’s decline and adjust U.S. policies to account for what can be reasonably expected of Cairo in coming years.

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What issues should the United States prioritize and how should it manage the tension among priorities? In addition to revisiting Egypt’s overall position in U.S. policy, the United States should review which issues in the bilateral relationship should receive the most attention. U.S. security interests traditionally have dominated Egypt policy. There has, moreover, been a tendency to pursue military/security issues and political/human-rights ones on separate tracks, based on a belief that U.S.-Egyptian security relations should be insulated from the political turbulence that pushing on human rights often causes in the larger relationship.

But under this approach, U.S. officials are prevented from addressing human rights and governance issues with the very Egyptian actors

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44. Jonathan R. Cohen, “Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt,” Testimony: U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Nomination Hearing, June 20, 2019, [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/062019\\_Cohen\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/062019_Cohen_Testimony.pdf)

45. Miller, Binder, and Keeler, “President Trump’s Third Foreign Affairs Budget.”

who have the most influence on these issues: the military and intelligence chiefs. And it does not account for the interdependence between human rights and security issues, in particular how human rights violations can fuel security threats and contribute to instability.<sup>46</sup> A new administration will be faced with the short-term costs of irritating Egypt by raising the profile of human rights, on the one hand, and the inherent limits of security-centric policies, on the other. In order to navigate these obstacles, the U.S. government will need to weigh these priorities carefully and develop policies that recognize, not deny, the tensions between security cooperation and the promotion of human rights.

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Likewise, a new administration will also have to decide which human rights or domestic political issues to prioritize. The Egyptian government's human rights violations are too vast to count, but U.S. influence in Egypt, as in other countries, is not infinite and Washington cannot expect to have an impact on everyone.<sup>47</sup> Rather than diluting

U.S. influence by making a full-court press on all matters of concern, it may make more sense for Washington to identify the most important problems—those that the United States believes will be most deleterious to Egyptian stability—and to focus its advocacy and pressure on those concerns.

How much influence should the United States have over Egypt and what approach would maximize U.S. leverage? Like other authoritarian countries, and because it feels entitled to unconditional U.S. support by virtue of having made peace with Israel, Egypt is difficult for the United States to influence under the best of conditions, and particularly in the short term. But contrary to what is sometimes argued, the United States—Egypt's most paramount foreign partner and military supplier—is hardly devoid of leverage.

In the few instances when U.S. officials have tied Egypt's desire for U.S. military aid and diplomatic support to changes in domestic and regional policies, they have succeeded in pushing back on, or even reversing, repressive actions by Cairo, freeing detained American citizens and shaping Egypt's foreign policy in a direction more aligned with U.S. interests.<sup>48</sup> While a new administration should not overstate U.S. influence in Egypt, neither should it operate on the assumption that it has none. The relationship with the United States remains Egypt's most important.

46. Brian Dooley, "Egypt's President Is Crushing Dissent—and Fueling ISIS," Defense One, April 3, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/04/egypts-dissent-crushing-president-fueling-isis/156035/>

47. "Egypt: Events of 2018," in Human Rights Watch World Report 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/egypt>

48. Andrew Miller and Seth Binder, "The Case for Arms Embargoes against Uncooperative Partners," War on the Rocks, May 10, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/the-case-for-arms-embargoes-against-uncooperative-partners/>

## RECOMMENDED POLICY

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The next administration should approach Egypt as a challenge to be managed, not as a strategic asset for which to compete. As argued above, Egypt is no longer a vital U.S. partner in the Middle East. While the United States continues to have security interests there, some of these interests are less significant than in the past and others do not require coddling the regime to achieve. The most important threat to U.S. interests today in Egypt is instability caused by repressive governance and economic mismanagement. Obviously, the United States will not determine Egypt's future trajectory—dynamics inside the country are always paramount—but how the United States engages with Egypt is a factor in what happens there. Too often, U.S. policy toward Egypt unintentionally has served to enable harmful Egyptian domestic policies. Even if we cannot save Egypt from itself, the United States must not make its problems worse and should use what influence it does have more constructively.

Given Egypt's reluctance to address voluntarily the concerns of outside actors and penchant for pocketing U.S. support, the next administration should pursue a more explicitly transactional relationship with Cairo, which avoids tying the United States too closely to al Sisi's authoritarian regime. A new president should calibrate U.S. support, both diplomatic and financial, based on the level of cooperation it receives from the Egyptian government on U.S. interests in security and stability. In practice, this means that the United States should work with and support Egypt to the extent necessary to promote core interests such as CT cooperation, U.S. military transit, and peace with Israel. But where U.S. and Egyptian views

diverge, such as over whether al Sisi's repression threatens Egypt's stability, the administration should not hesitate to apply pressure, recognizing that while it will be difficult to modify the regime's behavior, it may be wise to create distance from a regime resented by much of its population and with an uncertain future.

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The Egyptian government may perceive such an approach as a deliberate downgrading of the bilateral relationship, but is not likely to respond in ways that cause real damage to U.S. interests in the Middle East. Regarding Israel, for instance, Egypt derives important benefits from the peace treaty, independent of any U.S. action. Indeed, the Egyptian-Israeli relationship has become self-sustaining. Today, as the two neighbors collaborate in unprecedented ways to combat a jihadist insurgency in Sinai and pursue large natural gas deals, Cairo's relations with the Jewish state are probably their strongest ever.<sup>49</sup> On CT cooperation, the Egyptian security services will not cease pursuing terrorists or accepting U.S. intelligence on mutual threats. Jihadists in Egypt who threaten U.S. interests also pose a direct threat to the Egyptian state and the Egyptian authorities must deal with them, irrespective of the standing of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. Regarding access

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49. Danny Zaken, "Israel, Egypt Strengthen Energy Ties," Al-Monitor, July 31, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/07/israel-egypt-yuval-steinitz-natural-gas-energy-sinai-cairo.html>

for U.S. military transit, U.S. military planes cross Egyptian airspace on their way to target common enemies, and the United States actually provides financial compensation to Egypt for each navy ship that goes through the Suez Canal, significant revenue that Egypt is unlikely to forgo.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, concerns in the national security establishment about “losing” Egypt to Russia or China should the United States recalibrate its support are overblown.<sup>51</sup> While both countries have increased their activities in Egypt under al Sisi, neither represents a credible alternative to the United States. Neither Russia nor China provides military aid to Egypt, as the United States does, and the Egyptian military will remain dependent on U.S.-provided arms, maintenance, and spare parts for decades to come. Egypt will continue to play the United States off Russia and China to maintain some degree of independence, but Cairo has no desire to become a vassal of Moscow or Beijing.

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The next administration should reshape U.S. policy toward Egypt by taking the following steps. Congress is a major player in relations with Egypt, and the next administration should engage early and often with Capitol Hill on a reorientation of the U.S. approach.

**Reduce Egypt’s annual military aid package while leaving open the possibility that this funding could be restored (or even increased) if Cairo begins to make bigger contributions to U.S. interests.**

There are two compelling reasons to reduce Egypt’s military aid. First, the annual US\$1.3 billion package, the second-largest in the world behind Israel, has not brought the return on investment envisioned when it began some forty years ago. Egypt’s contribution to U.S. security interests has declined, and the aid is more than Egypt needs to address mutual security threats. Some of those resources can be used better elsewhere. In recent years, the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee has recommended a reduction to US\$1 billion in annual military aid for Egypt, a figure that better corresponds with U.S. interests and Egypt’s actual security needs.<sup>52</sup> Second, trimming Egypt’s aid package would demonstrate the credibility of future U.S. threats to reduce assistance, enhancing Washington’s leverage over Cairo.<sup>53</sup> If, as happened during the Obama administration, Egypt does not view U.S. threats to suspend assistance until its conditions are met as credible, it has no reason to adjust its conduct. The only way to shake Egypt from its sense of entitlement is to demonstrate that U.S. military aid is not sacrosanct. Once some aid to Egypt has been cut, the United States can then use the promise of reinstating the lost funding to elicit changes in Egyptian policies.

**Resume public criticism of Cairo’s human rights record.**

Private diplomacy with Egypt on human rights issues seldom yields results unless it is paired with public criticism. Public expressions of dissatisfaction signal to Egypt that the United

50. Andrew Miller, “Commentary: Five Myths about U.S. Aid to Egypt,” Reuters, August 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-miller-egypt-commentary/commentary-five-myths-about-u-s-aid-to-egypt-idUSKBN1KY1WJ>

51. Andrew Miller and Michele Dunne, “Losing Egypt to Russia Isn’t the Real Problem—But Collapse Is,” *National Interest*, July 20, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/losing-egypt-russia-isnt-real-problem%E2%80%94collapse-26336>

52. Bryant Harris, “Senate Panel Slashes Military Aid to Egypt,” *Al-Monitor*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/09/senate-slashes-military-aid-egypt-sisi-cairo.html>

53. Miller and Sokolsky, “Actually, Egypt Is a Terrible Ally.”

States sincerely cares about an issue and impose a reputational cost on the Egyptian government. The Trump White House's general avoidance of criticizing Egypt in public has sent the message that human rights and governance issues are not U.S. priorities, when in fact they should be seen as critical to Egypt's future and to American interests. It can be argued that the Obama administration was too often public about its human rights concerns, leading the Egyptian government to tune out Washington. But, to the extent this was true, the answer is not to go silent but instead to concentrate public criticism on the rights issues that are most important for Egypt's stability. Such issues include preserving space for Egypt's beleaguered civil society, stopping extrajudicial killings and torture in Egyptian prisons, and releasing political detainees.

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**Maintain an open channel with al Sisi, but refrain from high-profile, prestige meetings that Egypt could interpret as a U.S. endorsement.**

Ignoring al Sisi is unlikely to change his behavior, but speaking with him should not be viewed as a reward. Telephone calls are not only appropriate but prudent. Meetings, however, should not take place in the Oval Office, which accords al Sisi the international legitimacy he so desires, and should only happen once Egypt has addressed U.S. policy concerns. In granting al Sisi two White House visits in two years without any prior Egyptian

commitments to address U.S. concerns, Trump has needlessly squandered U.S. influence. Egypt deeply values the public embrace of the U.S. government, which along with military aid is the most important source of American leverage over Cairo. The next administration should use Egypt's desire for a U.S. endorsement more strategically, conditioning public signals of support on changes to Egyptian policy.

**Redouble efforts to shift U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation away from a heavy focus on equipment transfers and toward professionalization and training of Egyptian forces in modern warfare.**

Decades of U.S. weapons transfers to Egypt have not substantially improved the capabilities of the Egyptian military, especially in dealing with asymmetric threats such as terrorist groups. This is partly because Egypt has prioritized the acquisition of weapons systems that are inappropriate for its immediate threat environment, such as Abrams tanks, and partly because the Egyptian military tends not to employ U.S.-supplied weapons effectively.<sup>54</sup> While the Obama administration modified U.S. military assistance policy to support the procurement of more appropriate weapons systems, the U.S. military has been unsuccessful in persuading its Egyptian counterpart to reevaluate its strategy and tactics.<sup>55</sup> Since friendly persuasion has not produced the desired results, the next administration should consider conditioning the sale of certain equipment items on Egypt's agreement to participate in U.S. training programs aimed at improving the professionalism of the Egyptian military and its ability to confront terrorist groups.

**Boost U.S. diplomatic attention to Egypt's legitimate security challenges, in particular**

54. Robert Springborg and F. C. Williams, "The Egyptian Military: A Slumbering Giant Awakes," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 28, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/02/28/egyptian-military-slumbering-giant-awakes-pub-78238>

55. Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, August 12, 2008, [https://www.everysreport.com/files/20080812\\_RL33003\\_eb2608abafbfd9c8d5d0e04158f579574bfb7b7.pdf](https://www.everysreport.com/files/20080812_RL33003_eb2608abafbfd9c8d5d0e04158f579574bfb7b7.pdf)

**the looming crisis posed by water scarcity in the face of increased population growth.**

While Egypt's inefficient water-use practices have made the country more vulnerable to a water crisis, Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which is situated on a tributary of the Nile River (the source of 85 percent of Egypt's fresh water), poses a real danger to Egyptian stability by threatening its share of Nile water flow.<sup>56</sup> If the rate of the fill period for the dam is too rapid, it could reduce Egypt's water supply by up to 20 percent.<sup>57</sup> As discussed above, it is not easy for the United States to address potential sources of instability in Egypt, especially those that stem from the Egyptian government's own actions. Managing water scarcity, however, is one such challenge where the U.S. government may be able to help, and for which the needed U.S. investment—mostly diplomatic attention and technical expertise—is comparatively modest. The Trump administration, commendably, has initiated mediation among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan on the GERD. But even if the conflict over the GERD is resolved, Egypt still faces other serious threats to its water supply, including mismanagement.

**Expand U.S. diplomatic outreach to include a wider array of political actors in Egypt.**

It is a mistake to limit U.S. engagement to the Egyptian regime and its supporters. Egypt is bigger, and more complex, than al Sisi. The United States needs to have relationships and to establish trust with other Egyptian actors. Over Mubarak's thirty years in power, the U.S. government limited interactions with a variety of Mubarak's opponents in deference to the Egyptian leader, which left

American officials scrambling after he fell from power.<sup>58</sup> We should not continue this narrow and flawed approach. The next administration should make a strategic decision to engage the widest range of political actors possible, even if doing so antagonizes the Egyptian government. This outreach should mainly take the form of diplomatic outreach rather than aid programs. Certainly, to the extent possible, the United States should look for opportunities to expand civilian (nonmilitary) assistance to reach new sectors of the population, especially in key issue areas such as water management, education, and health. At present, U.S. civilian aid to Egypt is only one-tenth the size of military aid and mostly benefits the Egyptian government and its allies. But the next administration must have modest expectations for what such aid programs can achieve. With tens of billions of aid dollars spent, the U.S. track record on development in Egypt over the past decades is disappointing, and the never very hospitable environment has grown even less permissive under al Sisi. A new U.S. president should also consider creating a special visa category for Egyptian civil society activists, human rights defenders, scholars, journalists, and political figures under threat from al Sisi and seeking to escape Egypt and relocate to the United States or other safe environments. This would be an important humanitarian gesture and a strategic investment to help support influential, pro-democracy Egyptians who could contribute positively to their country in the future. Indeed, helping a pro-democracy contingent of Egyptians survive these very dark times under al Sisi is one of the best investments that the United States could make.

56. Tareq Baconi, "The End Is Nile: International Cooperation on Egypt's Water Crisis," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 25, 2018, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_end\\_is\\_nile\\_international\\_cooperation\\_on\\_egypts\\_water\\_crisis](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_end_is_nile_international_cooperation_on_egypts_water_crisis)

57. Michele Dunne and Katherine Pollock, "River of Discontent," Carnegie Middle East Center, October 23, 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/73491>

58. Charles Dunne, "The Right Side of History," *American Interest*, January 31, 2011, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/01/31/the-right-side-of-history/>

## CONCLUSION

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The approach outlined in this chapter will be unsatisfying to those who believe that Egypt is a vital U.S. partner, or that the United States can transform the country. Under present circumstances, the best the United States can do is protect its highest priority interests, stop throwing good money after bad, and begin laying the ground-work for greater influence in the future. Egypt's decline as a regional power and a U.S. partner is regrettable, but it possesses latent potential for regional influence, for economic prosperity, and for better governance that it may be able to harness one day. Should Cairo begin

to show signs of tapping into such potential, the United States should be ready to seize on that opportunity to help Egypt chart a new course for its people and for the bilateral relationship. In the meantime, a new president would be wise to accept the limitations of the relationship under Egypt's current leadership and confine cooperation to where it is strictly necessary. Such a policy may not be inspiring, but it would be based on a more circumspect view of today's Egypt and a sounder assessment of U.S. interests, which is more than can be said for the current approach.





