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Making the Case: Think Twice Before Punishing Egypt

By Aki Peritz and Mieke Eoyang

Despite serious, continuing concerns with the Egyptian government—including a return to authoritarianism and the president's use of anti-Semitic slurs—America should not gut its foreign aid to Cairo. Here's how to make the case against punishing the Egyptian government and in favor of continuing U.S. assistance:

1. Egypt plays a critical role in the region and in America's security interests there.
2. U.S. businesses get a return when we provide aid to Egypt.
3. The bulk of our aid goes to the most stable pillar of secular Egyptian society: the military.
4. Things could get much, much worse in Egypt—and for us.

Egypt remains a troubled country, and its efforts at democracy are sputtering. After the fall of longtime U.S.-backed strongman Hosni Mubarak, President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power. Their government has taken steps which may indicate a return to authoritarian rule, but one with an Islamist bent. These include, among others:

- A Cairo court recently convicted 43 employees of foreign NGOs (including 16 Americans) of working in the country illegally. The court ordered the shuttering of multiple groups, including Freedom House and the National Democratic Institute.¹
- Egyptian prosecutors have been charging several high-profile individuals and media personalities with the crime of insulting the president.²
- Egyptian human rights groups allege prosecutors are increasingly targeting Coptic Christians on blasphemy or 'insulting Islam' charges.³

[The guilty verdicts in the NGO trials run] contrary to the universal principle of freedom of association and is incompatible with the transition to democracy.

— Secretary of State John Kerry,
June 4, 2013⁴

Morsi himself has made numerous documented anti-American and anti-Semitic comments.

- In 2010, he said “the Zionists” were “bloodsuckers” and “the descendants of apes and pigs.”⁵
- Morsi also has said that they must “confront the Zionist entity” [Israel] and “avoid normalization of relations with it.” He also called for a boycott of American goods.⁶
- During a contentious meeting with several U.S. senators in January 2013, Morsi told his guests, “We know the media of the United States is controlled by certain forces, and they don’t view me favorably.”⁷

Because of these and other issues, some in Congress want to reduce or withhold the \$1.5 billion in annual aid to Egypt until Cairo gets its act together—or until the Brotherhood leaves power.⁸

While the U.S. should remain wary of the Brotherhood’s intentions, slashing our aid to Egypt would not be wise, because denying them this money will ultimately hinder U.S. national security interests in the region. Here’s why:

Egypt plays a critical role in the region and in American security interests there.

Despite his outrageous rhetoric, President Morsi has done nothing to abrogate the agreements Egypt has with the U.S. or the decades-old Egypt-Israel peace treaty. Much of our aid, after all, is contingent upon maintaining the peace treaty with Israel.

- Cairo has been destroying the tunnels that run under the Egypt-Gaza Strip border, used to smuggle goods that strengthen Hamas’ grip on that sliver of land.⁹
- Morsi helped negotiate a ceasefire between Israel and the terrorist group Hamas in late 2012.¹⁰

The U.S. regularly—if quietly—works with the Egyptians to secure our own direct national interests in the Middle East.

- The US Navy regularly uses the Suez Canal.¹¹
- Because of our aid, Egypt gives the U.S. military priority consideration for use of its airspace.¹²

MAKING THE CASE

Egypt and its president continue to say and do upsetting things. But torpedoing the relationship is not a way to improve relations.

Egypt remains a strong military and strategic partner of the United States.

— The U.S. Department of State, 2012¹³

MAKING THE CASE

We need Egypt for our own national security needs, no matter who is in power.

U.S. businesses get a return when we provide aid to Egypt.

Much of the money provided to Egypt returns to U.S. businesses because Cairo buys our weapons.

- These funds have been used to purchase Made-In-America F-16 fighter jets, M1A1 Abrams tanks, and Apache helicopters, among other equipment.¹⁴
- It's a win-win for everyone: we help maintain peace in a critical part of the Middle East, and American businesses make money.

The bulk of our aid goes to the most stable pillar of secular Egyptian society: the military.

The U.S. provides Egypt's armed forces with \$1.3 billion annually; about another \$250 million goes to economic development.¹⁵

- Cairo actually buys more American-made hardware than what our aid provides—between 2001-2009, we gave Egypt about \$11.7 billion, but during the same time, they bought \$15.4 billion worth of military goods.¹⁶
- America spends about a million dollars annually bringing Egyptian officers to the U.S. for training through our International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs.¹⁷ This tiny amount of money means America has access to Egypt's top military brass.

Things could get much, much worse in Egypt—and for us.

The prospect of total chaos in Egypt is real—the country is rapidly going broke, political factions are openly battling, and crimes against religious minorities and women are increasing.¹⁹

- While Egypt in May received a \$3 billion loan from Qatar,²⁰ halting for now the specter of financial chaos, this lifeline won't pull Egypt completely out of its financial predicament.
- Sadly, the U.S. doesn't have a credible alternative for governance of the world's largest Arab country.

The value of American military-to-military relationships is evident when you compare the transition in Egypt with events in Libya and the ongoing brutality in Syria.

— CENTCOM Commander
Gen. James Mattis¹⁸

MAKING THE CASE

We have few alternatives in Egypt to the current government.

The next most cohesive political group besides the Muslim Brotherhood is the ultraconservative Salafists, whose al-Nour party controls 24% of Egypt's parliament.²¹ These dour, hardline Islamic fundamentalists are both well-organized and unsympathetic to Western interests.

Conclusion

Few in America believe Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood are desirable partners. But they were democratically elected, and wishful thinking will not transform them into a liberal-leaning government, nor will it erase Egypt's systemic challenges.

Punishing Egypt by withholding aid could weaken the state to the point of failure. In the absence of real alternatives to Morsi's government, gutting foreign aid to Egypt would be counterproductive for the region, our allies, and our interests.

MAKING THE CASE

Gutting foreign aid to Egypt would be counterproductive for the region, our allies, and our interests.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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