



Future US-Egyptian Relations: The Old Status Quo Redux

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A long time ago, there appeared to be a symbiotic relationship between the United States and Egypt. The former was a strategic benefactor that understood the importance of the largest Arab state, while the latter appreciated, and counted on, a largesse that spanned military assistance and economic support when post-socialist policies failed as a panacea for long-term stunted development. But the chaos brought by the Arab Spring to both Egyptian politics and US-Egyptian relations highlighted the inconsistencies inherent in American support for the stability of the Egyptian regime, despite its authoritarianism, and Washington's commitment to its ineffectual preaching about democratic ideals and respect for human rights.

Indeed, the lukewarm and barely-businesslike relationship today between Washington and Cairo resulted from a decision by the Obama Administration to finally re-evaluate its relationship with America's erstwhile ally when the popular uprising of January 2011 was upending President Hosni Mubarak's regime. The White House and the American foreign policy apparatus set in motion a policy shift that helped pave the way for a democratic transformation at the top of the political system through the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – in the person of President Mohammad Morsi – despite the difficulties Islamists were sure to encounter from what became known as the 'deep state.' For over two years after the revolution, the Obama Administration thought its new policy was producing a guaranteed democratic opening, albeit through a historically illiberal political movement, and continuously pressured the Egyptian armed forces, the most powerful organ of the deep state, to allow for the change it hoped would produce the imagined result.

But said state and its vaunted politicized and self-interested military institution had no patience or desire to see its privileges rescinded and exalted position compromised. The Brotherhood's penchant for its own version of authoritarianism and its dislike for political compromise inherent to secular politics made matters worse. Additionally, powerful outside actors saw the rise of an Islamist political organization as a precursor to wider challenges to the status quo in Arab affairs. These seemingly irreconcilable conditions quickly led to the overthrowing of political Islam's democracy in July of 2013 by the same military institution that stood aside as Mubarak resigned from office, and indeed urged his departure in the hope that it could preserve its corporatist interests and position in society.

What became clear after mid-2013, however, was that the new leaders of the authoritarian state – namely, then-Defense Minister, now-President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his cohorts in the military-security establishment – set out to re-energize authoritarian rule and further deepen its control. Briefly, today’s Egyptian government continues to hold thousands of political prisoners, curb political expression and press freedoms, and extinguish any remnants of the democratic impulse of the 2011 revolution. The Egyptian military is very much in control of society and the economy, and its reach has extended to all sectors of economic activity. Whatever judicial independence Egypt’s judges were able to wriggle out of the Mubarak regime has practically been lost and the judiciary finds itself under pressure to approve government edicts, such as the counter-terrorism law passed in 2015 that may not have much impact on curbing terrorist activity. Indeed, what has become clear is the renewal of a time-tested practice of creating a cult of personality for President Sisi that does not augur well for the future of the country.

Such a return to the old status quo – many consider the situation worse – confronts American policy-makers again as the United States chooses a new president who will have to grapple with the dichotomous choice between an Egypt too precious to abjure and democratic ideals too dear to abandon. Egypt remains the same strategically located Middle Eastern state astride two continents, host to the Suez Canal through which American naval vessels traverse, essential to Israeli security, and crucial to the defense of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, among other attributes. Despite tense relations since 2013, Egypt’s military continues to be part of the American overall strategic architecture in the Middle East and receives commensurate assistance from a not-too-enthusiastic Obama Administration. With a population of over ninety million inhabitants, Egypt’s economic wellbeing is a concern given the inefficiencies inherent to its crony capitalist development and corrupt political structure. The rise of a jihadist threat in the Sinai Peninsula adds uncertainty and numerous wild and feared possibilities that need to be addressed decisively. Egypt’s stability thus, and that of a wide swathe of contiguous real estate, is not to be taken lightly but to receive the attention and assured commitment the new administration will see it deserves.

But such a commitment will certainly be tested not only by the domestic transgressions of an authoritarian regime, but also by the latter’s exploitation of the American strategic predicament in the Middle East to construct a parallel alliance structure. After his coup and the subsequent American condemnation and short suspension of military assistance, President Sisi sought and enthusiastically received the support of Russian President Vladimir Putin, in the process securing more than \$2 billion

in hardware and weapons. In essence, he held out until the administration and Congress restored badly-needed funds, mostly to the military. Still, he today seems to dance to the tune of authoritarian Russia and level criticism at the United States for allegedly interfering in Egyptian domestic affairs. Regarding Syria, Sisi seems to look at it through its regime's prism of fighting terrorists and not as a struggle for dignity and democracy. Like Putin and Assad, he looks at the Syrian crisis as an example of an over-reaching Islamic trend that, if allowed, will come back to haunt Egypt.

Despite his non-committal to run for another term in 2018, President Sisi will most assuredly declare his candidacy and win in a landslide like presidents before him (except for Morsi). The new American president will thus have to deal with him for a considerable period of time, all the while assessing the best course of action for continued American-Egyptian relations. Odds are that if American voters put their trust in Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who as Secretary of State advised President Obama about a phased Egyptian transition in 2011, she will likely continue the current obligatory acceptance of authoritarianism but call for democracy and respect for human rights. A President Donald Trump (I shudder at the prospect!) would probably quickly visit Egypt and pay homage to its pyramids that represent its authoritarian past and oppressive present, democratic impulses among Egyptians be damned. In either case, and despite its weaknesses, Sisi's Egypt will continue to exploit the American need for stability in the Arab world's largest and most strategically consequential country.

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