



Going Forward on Egyptian-American Relations

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February 21, 2017

Egypt recently marked the sixth anniversary of the resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak and his handover of power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Much has happened in the interim, but not much has changed in the life of ordinary Egyptians or in terms of the prospects of development and democracy in Egypt. There are clear signs that the authoritarianism that governed the country for over six decades, momentarily checked by the Revolution of January 25, 2011, has reared its proverbial ugly head again. The democracy that millions of Egyptians embraced and hoped would finally deliver the sought-after open society has lost many of its attributes, although its appearances of elections and institutions persist under the military regime.

The erosion of whatever democratic values the 2011 revolution attempted to instill has lately been met with the instauration of a Trump Administration that does not seem to consider their absence detrimental to stability in Egypt nor to American national interest in a stable Egypt. In fact, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi may have found some close kindred in President Donald Trump, who is exhibiting worrisome tendencies regarding American democracy and democratic values. The two men have expressed mutual admiration in each other since they first met in New York at the United Nations' 71st session in September 2016. Sisi then had “no doubt” that Trump [would be](#) a strong leader, while Trump [described](#) his interlocutor as “a fantastic guy.” The Egyptian president was the first world leader to congratulate the American president on winning, and President Trump [committed](#) in a telephone conversation after his inauguration to assist Egypt economically and in its war on terrorism.

As the administration moves to devise its foreign policy in the Middle East, the [assessment](#) that American-Egyptian relations during a Trump presidency would very likely see more appreciation for Egypt as a strategic partner than as a bastion of democratic freedoms and practices still stands. To be sure, the mutual Sisi-Trump pleasantries are only the tip of the iceberg of relations between the two countries in the foreseeable future, and they do not appear to contain much American concern or support for democratic development and the rule of law in Egypt.

Democracy and Human Rights Issues in Egypt

While appearances of democracy are daily on display—a government structure, an elected parliament, print and electronic media, and a court system, to name a few—democratic life in Egypt has gradually but steadily seen a retreat. A [managed democracy](#) has taken hold according to which the political system goes through the motions of parliamentary legislation, government

implementation, and judicial review. And yet, a securitized life organized by the organs of the deep state and the country's armed forces and security services seems to be the norm.

An [anti-terrorism law](#) promulgated in mid-August 2015 gives state institutions broad powers to control public life. The law's provisions arguably consider any political activity to be an act of terror, gives the security forces the right to interfere in all matters they deem detrimental to national interests as they define them, and allows the president to declare an endless state of emergency. In essence, all political activity in Egypt has been subjected to the executive branch's broad powers while the legislative branch, for all intents and purposes, has become beholden to security agencies and rubber stamps government policies.

Not long after then-Minister of Defense Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi toppled elected President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, a court banned the Muslim Brotherhood and the interim government of President Adly Mansour in December and [declared](#) it a terrorist organization, blaming it for an attack in the city of al-Mansoura in the Nile Delta. In August 2014, it [dissolved](#) the Freedom and Justice Party, which was the Brotherhood's political wing. Criminalizing the group deprived a large segment of Egyptian society of a channel for peaceful political expression and left the military regime—supported as it was, and remains, by the armed forces and the security agencies—in charge of the country's post-coup political roadmap that included amending the constitution and organizing presidential and parliamentary elections.

Estimates of the number of political prisoners vary in the thousands, but Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) torture, abuse, disappearances, wrongful imprisonment without sufficient evidence, and curtailment on the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. Some 7,400 “military trials of civilians” have been brought since widening “the scope of military jurisdiction in 2014.” An [anti-protest](#) law in November 2013 has resulted in the stifling of public dissent in a bid to deprive activists of all stripes of the right to voice their opinion. In early 2016, President Sisi even [warned](#) Egyptians against protesting when rumors of another revolution were circulating, reminding them that they chose him to lead the country when he staged his coup in 2013 and that there was no need for another uprising.

An Egyptian court has recently [added](#) over 1,500 names to a terrorist list made legal by the 2015 anti-terrorism law, including those of former President Morsi and his sons and associates. The accused are banned from travel, their assets are frozen, and they are deprived of political rights. The government's crackdown also [includes](#) persecuting, harassing, and arresting workers and union members to prevent independent labor activism. Civil society organizations have been on the regime's list of adversaries for quite some time. The government has recently [closed](#) Al Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Nazra for Feminist Studies, two small organizations involved in counseling victims of torture and sexual abuse. Their assets have been frozen and their personnel banned from overseas travel. The anti-terror law even [forces](#) the media covering the war against Islamic State terrorists in the Sinai Peninsula to carry only what

the Ministry of Defense publishes, and many journalists have either been imprisoned or have stopped reporting from the area.

From its side, the Egyptian government is justifiably concerned about the war in Sinai against Wilayat Sinai (WS), the Egyptian chapter of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Tens of thousands of soldiers and security personnel, fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, and tanks and armored vehicles have been [deployed](#) against WS across the peninsula. The organization has threatened to establish a jihadist state that would constitute a grave danger to the Egyptian state, Israel, and maritime navigation. In fact, the large number of Egyptian soldiers in the area is testament to this danger since Egypt—according to the 1979 peace treaty with Israel—is disallowed from deploying forces there except by mutual agreement with its neighbor to the east. The problem, however, remains in the Egyptian government’s use of this war to justify its crackdown on all independent political activity. That the Muslim Brotherhood exhibited its own strain of authoritarian tendencies during the short period of Morsi’s rule does not legitimize the state of emergency the Egyptian regime maintains and uses to stifle democratic development across the land.

Issues of Future Cooperation and Potential Discord

Even before his ascendance to the White House, President-elect Trump—in an unusual interference in American foreign policy—[persuaded](#) President Sisi in a telephone conversation to postpone proposing a resolution at the UN Security Council condemning Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. It fell to non-Arab Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal, and Venezuela to put forth [Resolution 2334](#), which later passed the council 14-0 with the United States abstaining. Egypt has also been silent on President Trump’s executive order banning citizens from seven Muslim-majority nations, probably in the hope that refraining from criticism would help relations going forward.

For the next four years, President Sisi will look to curry favor with President Trump despite the confusion dominating the administration’s foreign policy in the Middle East and around the world. He also will try to use his relationship with the American president to enhance his domestic legitimacy and the regime’s stability. Objectively, however, American-Egyptian relations are likely to witness both cooperation and discord on a number of issues of mutual concern.

First, the Egyptian regime and the Trump Administration will do their best to coordinate on what they deem is a terrorist threat. President Trump is [contemplating](#) a law designating the Muslim Brotherhood a foreign terrorist organization, which in effect complements his campaign rhetoric that equated Islam with terrorism. Nothing would be better for an Egyptian regime that has staked its survival on the task of eradicating what arguably is the most capable political movement. However, the potential law may very well make the United States a party to a schism between Arab and Middle Eastern countries or movements that either adhere to the general ideology of the

organization, like ally Turkey and adversary Palestinian Hamas, or consider it a spawning ground from which modern jihadist and extremist formations have emerged, like today's Egypt.

Second, the Trump-Sisi relationship is likely to extend into some other arenas by combining the duo's authoritarian tendencies with their simultaneous admiration of Russian President Vladimir Putin. While President Trump's domestic detractors and the United States' general anti-Russian orientation may limit his ability to have warm relations with Putin, US foreign policy officials are unlikely to pressure Sisi not to cooperate with the Kremlin master in Syria and Libya—the former being Russia's strategic footprint and the latter serving as its conduit to North Africa.

The Egyptian president has committed himself to a close relationship with Russia, showed a troubling affinity with Syria's Bashar al-Asad, and openly supported Libyan General Khalifa Haftar in his challenge to the United Nations-supported Government of National Accord. From his side, President Trump so far sees no discernible benefit in opposing Asad; Washington lacks a strong presence on the ground in Syria and has declared that US objectives there are thus far limited to fighting ISIL. In Libya, American leverage is almost completely absent and ISIL has been defeated in Sirte—thus obviating any specific need for American direct engagement—and Trump seems to have no desire to curtail Sisi's ambitions on Egypt's western border.

Third, looking at Egypt as a strategic foothold will undoubtedly lead to continuing the economic and military cooperation of yesteryear; but, importantly, this would be without what Sisi would describe as American pontification on democracy and human rights. Since 1979, Egypt has received roughly \$3 billion annually in American economic and military aid, and the basis of the strategic partnership with the United States has been military cooperation that has included weapons sales, training of Egyptian forces, joint exercises and operations, and intelligence coordination and sharing. From the American perspective, interest in Egypt also centers on rights of passage through the Suez Canal, which is essential to the American strategic posture from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. Relations with Egypt also determine how the American military responds to crises from the Red Sea through the Yemeni Bab al-Mandab passageway to East Africa and the Arabian Sea. In essence, it is no exaggeration to state that American military doctrine in the Middle East may not amount to much without an open strategic partnership with Egypt.

But what also concerns the Egyptian government today is a commitment to help the Egyptian economy, given the general slowdown in performance over the last few years due to security challenges and structural problems. Economic [indicators](#) point to serious troubles. While growth is expected to be 4.2 percent in 2017, inflation stands at 11 percent and unemployment at 12.1 percent, representing two heavy drags on the economy. Government spending is at 35.1 percent of GDP while the annual deficit stands at 12.7 percent. Tourism has especially been hit hard. According to the government's Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), the number of tourists visiting the country [dropped](#) by 40 percent in 2016. Tourist revenues between July and September alone fell by 56.1 percent from the same period in 2015, which

witnessed a drop from prior years. Recent economic [reform measures](#) included cutting public subsidies and a currency devaluation that helped the government secure a \$12 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, which allowed it to shore up foreign exchange reserves. Thus, a continued American commitment to Egypt's economic and financial health is likely to remain an important issue in the foreseeable future.

Fourth, the Trump Administration will recruit Egypt to play a role again in convincing the Palestinian Authority to go along with an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, one that President Trump seems to think is possible after he practically did away with the United States' adherence to the two-state solution. But recruiting Egypt may not bear the intended fruit for a number of reasons. First, Egypt cannot abandon the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which represents the collective Arab perspective on a future peace accord. Second, mediating with the Palestinians requires helping them achieve unity of purpose, something that Egypt has forfeited because of its war on Hamas as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Third, the Arab world insists that Palestinians speak for themselves and decide their own future. Unfortunately, what Palestinians are promised by a Trump peace initiative will not satisfy their demands for an independent Palestinian state. Fourth, it is indeed doubtful that Egypt has much leverage over how a peace deal is achieved now that the Arab world and the Palestinians believe that the Trump Administration is simply fronting for the Israeli government and has bought into the policies and practices of the right-wing government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Fifth, and finally, the Trump Administration may have illusions about an Egyptian readiness to help confront a strident Iranian policy across the Arab world and the Middle East. Despite Egypt's need—some may say expectation—to help mollify Saudi Arabian and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) trepidation about the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country is in no political or economic shape to form a pillar of a potential Trump plan to confront the Iranian mullahs. Egypt even [had qualms](#) about getting involved in Yemen against the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels, when asked by Saudi Arabia to join the Arab coalition to restore legitimate rule to Sanaa. Furthermore, considering the below-the-surface tension between Saudi Arabia and Egypt regarding sovereignty over the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir in the Strait of Tiran, and Egypt's stance on Syria at the UN Security Council, it is doubtful that Egypt would be in a great hurry to participate in a wider plan to contain Iranian ambitions aggressively.

Recommended Contours of Future Relations

There is no doubt that Egypt will remain a pivotal actor in American foreign policy in the Middle East, whenever the Trump Administration gets around to formulating it. Political, strategic, military, and economic relations will continue to constitute the pillars of the future relationship, with important caveats.

On the one hand, and despite the cynicism with which the Trump Administration seems to be dealing with world affairs, American policy in Egypt must return to a healthy emphasis on urging

its ally to respect the democratic process and protect human rights. This should not be understood merely as a utopian adherence to higher principles but as an approach that protects American national interests in a stable Egypt. By the same token, the administration should refrain from classifying the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and counsel against possible congressional legislation to that effect. The organization is not a democratic outfit; but such a designation would only further complicate American relations with parts of the Muslim world.

On the other hand, Egypt should be encouraged to measure its steps smartly in its relations with Russia. It took American planners and strategic thinkers a very long time to establish, strengthen, and sustain the American-Egyptian strategic partnership, which has become one of the most enduring phenomena of the post-cold war global architecture. An advanced Russian position in Egypt will undo all that since Russia will then strive to supplant American influence in one of the most important strategic locations in the world.

Finally, what would best serve American national interests in the geographic expanse from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean is encouraging Egypt and the Gulf Cooperation Council to increase their political and military cooperation to maintain a stalwart entente against Iranian policy and behavior in the wider Middle East.