



Stability in US-Egyptian Relations: Why the United States is Unlikely to Make a Major Policy Shift in Response to Egyptian Events

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What is NSI Reachback?

The Joint Staff, Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), jointly with other elements in the Joint Staff, Services, and United States Government (USG) Agencies, has established a Reachback capability based on the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) team’s global network of scholars and area experts. It provides Combatant Commands with population-based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations. The Reachback team combines written and interview elicitations with additional research and analyses to provide concise responses to time-sensitive questions.

This report responds to one of a series of questions posed by USCENTCOM about the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region.¹

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Question of Focus

[A1] What events in Egypt (protests, military coup) could result in the US reacting with severe policy shifts and mil-mil restrictions? As a result, would the government of Egypt degrade or deny current access, basing, and overflight (ABO) agreements?

Stability in US-Egyptian Relations: Why the United States is Unlikely to Make a Major Policy Shift in Response to Egyptian Events²

The United States' relationship with Egypt is generally thought to be an important one (Miller, 2020; Sharp, 2019; Wisner & Salem, 2017). However, some experts suggest that the benefits obtained by the United States for its assistance to Egypt may be overstated (Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020). Some members of Congress are similarly critical of this relationship (Barfi, 2020; Salem, 2020). Despite these criticisms, the expert contributors generally believe that the relationship will not undergo any fundamental shifts in the near-term (Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020). Several experts note that this question has in part been “stress tested” in the past—with Egypt undergoing several notable events (e.g., protest, a bloody crackdown, Islamist control, military coup) during the 2011-2014 period—with only a temporary suspension of United States assistance to Egypt implemented as a result (M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020). The continuity and durability of US policy toward Egypt highlights the strategic significance of the relationship and suggests that the tipping point threshold for a severe United States policy response to Egyptian events is high (M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Miller, 2020).³

The experts nevertheless cite a variety of events that could, in theory, prompt a strong response from the United States, characterized by major policy shifts and mil-mil restrictions. These can be classified into seven broad categories, with the first two being the most likely: a) deepening ties between Egypt and Russia, b) violent crackdowns by the Egyptian state, c) coups of a different kind than those seen in the recent past (e.g., coup by junior military officers), d) Egyptian misuse of American weapons, e) an Egyptian violation of its peace treaty with Israel, f) events that bring into question whether Egypt is a friendly and reliable partner, and g) events that fundamentally violate the nature of the US-Egyptian relationship. In deciphering how the United States is likely to respond to these events, it is also important to consider the role that administration preferences and priorities play (M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020).

² The following subject matter experts kindly contributed to this analysis: **an Anonymous Former White House and State Department Official**, **Mr. Barak Barfi** (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), **Mr. Charles Dunne** (George Washington University, Arab Center, Middle East Institute), **Dr. Michele Dunne** (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), **Mr. Michael Wahid Hanna** (The Century Foundation), **Dr. Arie Kruglanski** (University of Maryland), **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), and **Dr. Paul Salem** (Middle East Institute).

³ Salem (2020) similarly suggests that the threshold for a United States reaction to negative events in Egypt, this time under the current administration, is set high. Moreover, Israel will also play a role in moderating any United States response given its close relations with both the United States and Egypt.

From an Egyptian strategic perspective, it would be unwise to react punitively to a shift in United States policy by degrading or denying current access, basing, and overflight (ABO) agreements or otherwise endanger its military relationship with the United States. However, several expert contributors (C. Dunne, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020; Miller, 2020) indicate that a drastic reduction or permanent termination by the United States of its provision of aid to Egypt may lead the Egyptians to violate the ABO agreements or pursue an alternative foreign partner, such as Russia, China, or one of the Gulf states, for military assistance.

Administration Preferences and Priorities Matter

Administration preferences and priorities are likely to play a significant role in dictating whether various events in Egypt are likely to trigger a harsh United States response (M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020). For example, compared with the prior two administrations, the current administration has demonstrated a greater reluctance to intervene in what it sees as issues of domestic sovereignty, such as human rights (Hanna, 2020). Assessing administration preferences like this one provides some indication of whether the United States will react, for instance, to events in Egypt that give rise to regime crackdowns and violence (Hanna, 2020).



Administration orientation toward Egypt and toward the Egyptian President, Mohammad Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, should also be considered, though Congressional orientation also plays a role (M. Dunne, 2020; Hanna, 2020).⁴ Naturally, the inclinations of whomever is in control in Egypt, as well as the policies any new regime pursues, can also engender a US reconsideration of its relationship with Egypt (e.g., should a group that is anti-American come to power, it might seek to rupture the existing relationship; M. Dunne, 2020; Miller, 2020).

How Likely is a Shift in United States Policy Toward Egypt?

As it stands, United States-Egyptian relations have grown friendlier under the current administration, and current conditions suggest that it would take a major event for relations between the two countries to shift drastically. While there are some members of Congress who have a less favorable inclination toward Egypt, their concerns are unlikely to gravely threaten how the United States and Egypt engage (Salem, 2020). Overall, the relationship has been highly stable for several decades and is unlikely to change in the near-term (Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020).

We've been through a lot with the uprising, opposing Mubarak, Islamist control, a coup, a very bloody crackdown, and the fundamentals of the relationship remain fairly continuous.
— Hanna (2020)

Several experts indicate that the question of how likely a severe shift in United States policy towards Egypt is has essentially been “stress tested” over the past decade, as Egypt experienced significant events such as major protests, bloody crackdowns, the jailing of thousands of Egyptians, Islamist control, and a military coup during the 2011-2014 period⁵ without provoking dramatic United States policy shifts and mil-mil

⁴ For example, Congress may choose to eliminate the waiver that allows the administration to bypass, under certain conditions, Congressionally mandated certification requirements (M. Dunne, 2020; Sharp, 2019).

⁵ As Hanna (2020) notes, though the quality of US-Egypt relations varied during this period, the only major structural change to the relationship was the change to cash flow financing.

restrictions (M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020). Following a popularly backed coup in 2013, which resulted in the killing of more than 1,000 Egyptians in a protest camp, the United States enacted temporary restrictions on US assistance to Egypt, suggesting that the threshold at which Egyptian behavior would prompt a severe US reaction, such as a permanent cut or withdrawal of military aid, is high (M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Miller, 2020).

Nonetheless, the bipartisan discourse emerging among “liberals concerned for human rights” and “conservative aid skeptics” regarding the wisdom and necessity of large-scale US investments in the Middle East suggest that the United States might revisit its policy toward Egypt (Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Sharp, 2019). Thus, a shift in United States policy may be more likely to come as a result of a general shift in US strategic orientation and a purposeful decision to reduce engagement with the region than as a direct response to Egyptian action (Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020).⁶ A policy shift is also possible if a United States administration concludes that the strategic value of continued support to Egypt no longer supports specific policy objectives (e.g., due to Egypt’s human rights record or struggles with terrorism in the Sinai; Former White House and State Department official, 2020).

Events that Could Trigger a Severe US Policy Shift and Mil-Mil Restrictions

Though the overall likelihood of a major US policy shift toward Egypt is relatively low, the experts offered several different events or scenarios that could potentially trigger severe US policy shifts and mil-mil restrictions. Of course, it is also possible that some combination of these events will occur—or need to occur—in order to shift the relationship between the two countries. These events are summarized in Table 1 below, and their associated likelihood and examples are given where they were provided or could be reliably inferred. The most likely of these scenarios are then examined in greater detail below.

Table 1: Overview of events that could trigger severe US policy shifts and mil-mil restrictions toward Egypt

Potential Event	Likelihood of Event Occurring	Example(s)	Expert(s)
Deepening Egyptian Relationship with Russia			
Egypt allows further Russian inroads into its military	Probable	Expanded military relationship with more Russian military and intelligence personnel on the ground?	C. Dunne
Aggressive Egyptian tilt toward Russia that threatens Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge	Unspecified	Installing Russian S-300s where US and Israeli jets operate Disruptive Russian basing or intelligence posts	Former WH and DOS official
Egyptians agree to host a major Russian military installation	Possible	Large, permanent installation akin to what the Soviet Union had	Miller

⁶ Note, however, that support to Egypt might nonetheless continue even in the face of a broader drawdown in the region; this would occur as a function of an enduring US relationship with Israel and countries that are on good terms with Israel (Miller, 2020).

⁷ C. Dunne (2020) also makes note of prior sanction warnings that the United States gave to Egypt over the potential \$2 billion Russian deal for Su-35 warplanes.

Violent Crackdowns by the Egyptian State			
Sharp deterioration in the human rights situation and intensified crackdowns	Probable	Increasingly violent crackdowns on opposition (under guise of anti-terrorism) Expansion of roundups and arrests Additional legal/constitutional efforts to entrench the current leadership and deprive Egyptians of their remaining political rights	C. Dunne
An Egyptian revolt or revolution resulting in mass killings as part of a government crackdown ⁸	Possible		M. Dunne; Salem
A large-scale killing of civilians perpetrated by the Egyptian military, not just security forces	Unspecified		Barfi
Egyptian Misuse of American Weapons⁹			
Proven charges that American weapons have been deployed in a high-casualty incident	Probable	An event akin to the following, where there are allegations of weapons misuse: the fight against Islamist militants on the border with Libya, a spillover from that conflict, a battle against Islamic State militants of the group's Sinai "province," "Wilayat Sinaa," and in support of Libyan General Khalifa al-Haftar	C. Dunne
Egypt exerts military force (using American military equipment) in Ethiopia over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam ¹⁰	Unspecified		Miller
Egypt uses military force in Libya ¹¹	Unspecified		Miller
Coups of a Different Kind Than Those Seen in the Recent Past			
Coup by junior (rather than senior) military officers or by pro-Islamists	Unspecified	An event such as the 1952 Free Officers coup, executed by junior officers	M. Dunne
Coup by extremists, and the military is placed under their authority ¹²	Unlikely		Miller
Islamist radicals come to power through a terror campaign	Highly unlikely	This may come about in the case that civil unrest and popular uprising gave rise to military infighting and the collapse of government institutions ¹³	C. Dunne
Sunni Islamic revolution	Highly unlikely	Given no avenues for peaceful dissent, an opposition movement may emerge—whether related to the Muslim Brotherhood or to Salafi groups	M. Dunne
Coup intended to establish a regime predicated on pan-Arabism and complete independence from American tutelage	Unspecified		Barfi

⁸ A US response is more likely with a change in administration—for example, if “a left-leaning Democrat who has much less warmth for the current administration in Egypt” were elected in the 2020 presidential elections (Salem, 2020).

⁹ Note: This category includes Egyptian actions that would occur outside of Egypt. Nonetheless, as these actions likely reflect the intention of this report’s question of focus, they are included here.

¹⁰ While a US response to this scenario is possible under the current administration, such a response may be more likely under a different administration (Miller, 2020).

¹¹ A US response in this scenario is less likely than a scenario in which Egypt uses force in Ethiopia (Miller, 2020).

¹² A military coup by itself is unlikely to trigger a severe US response (Miller, 2020).

¹³ This situation would compromise the security of US military technology, as well as the safety of US civilian and military personnel and US contractors (C. Dunne, 2020).

Egypt Violates Peace Treaty with Israel			
Egypt engages in hostilities with Israel or begins deploying its forces in ways that violate its commitments under the treaty or adjoining security annex	Highly unlikely	Egypt moves more heavy weaponry into Area C than Israel is comfortable with, cuts ties with Israel, and allies with Hamas	Barfi; Miller
Hard line Islamist regime takes hold, compromising peace treaty with Israel	Unspecified		Hanna
The Egyptian government, due to pressure from its population, responds to Israel's extension of its territory in the West Bank ¹⁴	Unlikely to highly unlikely	Egypt is most likely to withdraw its ambassador from Israel, ask the Israeli ambassador to leave, or freeze the relationship in some way Less likely—though possible if there were a leadership change—would be a breach of the peace treaty with Israel	M. Dunne
Events that Bring into Question Whether Egypt is a Friendly and Reliable Partner			
The Muslim Brotherhood is brought to the fore, combines with ISIS elements	Unspecified	The Muslim Brotherhood pairs with ISIS elements to protect Sunnis against the Shia axis ¹⁵	Kruglanski
Armed insurgency within the country evolving into an Algeria-like civil war	Unlikely	One or more armed groups carry out battles with Egyptian forces all over the country or in multiple locations within the country ¹⁶	M. Dunne
Military fracture and conflict with other services	Unlikely	Tensions between Islamist and secular officers in the military, as well as tensions between the military and other security services, possibly rendering Egypt an unreliable partner	C. Dunne
Egypt enhances ties with Iran, in a way that could be described as a “tectonic shift” ¹⁷	Highly unlikely		Barfi
Events that Fundamentally Violate the Nature of the United States-Egyptian Relationship			
Serious breach of military security	Possible	Egypt's illicit ties and cooperation with North Korea on illegal arms trading and missile technology suggests the possibility that actors within the Egyptian military could knowingly (for profit) or unknowingly (through proximity) enable foreign powers to gain access to US military technology and equipment	C. Dunne
Egyptian military deliberately kills Americans	Unspecified	Multiple Americans killed	Miller

Highlight: Most Probable Events

The broad categories of events that are most likely to occur in Egypt, and which may under some conditions prompt a severe United States response, are a deepening Egyptian relationship with Russia and a violent crackdown of the Egyptian state.

¹⁴ According to M. Dunne (2020), there are no circumstances under which Egypt would go to war with Israel.

¹⁵ If the US defines ISIS as its main enemy, then this alliance could make Egypt an unfriendly entity to both the United States and Israel (Kruglanski, 2020).

¹⁶ The US may question if the Egyptian military can maintain control of its military equipment (M. Dunne, 2020).

¹⁷ In contrast, Hanna (2020) discusses the possibility of broader conflict with Iran, invoking wider regionalized conflict including Israel and the Gulf countries. He indicates that such a development could be destabilizing for Egypt as well as the region, and could also solicit the involvement of the United States with respect to Iran. Ultimately, however, he notes that “it's difficult to see any of those scenarios impacting Egypt in such a way that they would have consequential knock-on effects on US/Egypt relations.”

Deepening Egyptian Relationship with Russia

Expanding military ties between Russia and Egypt since 2015 have included joint military exercises, alleged cooperation in the Libyan civil war on the side of General Khalifa Haftar, and the preparation of a draft agreement that would enable the two countries to use each other's airspace and bases (C. Dunne, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2017). The presence of Russian jets in Egypt in particular may be problematic from a United States perspective as it may compromise the operational security of American military personnel (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Moreover, C. Dunne (2020) argues that this agreement could portend the establishment of a new Russian base in Egypt, and Miller (2020) similarly considers the possibility of Egypt agreeing to host a large-scale, permanent Russian installation, noting that this could provoke a strong United States response.

While Egypt can gain some advantages from a military relationship with Russia that it cannot gain from the United States (viz., diversification of arms supplies with fewer associated restrictions; no human rights criticism), Egypt may see Russia's benefit more in terms of being a tool for shaping its relations with the United States (C. Dunne, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020; Miller, 2018; Salem, 2020).¹⁸ Ultimately, however, Egypt's relationship with Russia is, and will remain, secondary to its relationships with the United States and with Israel (Salem, 2020). Russia, in turn, gains a symbolic win in terms of great power competition with the United States; to accomplish this goal, it need not eclipse the relationship Egypt has with the United States, but merely provoke the United States and inflate its own status in the region (C. Dunne, 2020). Yet, Salem (2020) argues that Egypt has no pathway to wholly replace the relationship it has with the United States with a relationship with Russia. Nevertheless, should Russia-Egypt military cooperation deepen further, to include additional Russian military and intelligence personnel on the ground, or should this relationship come to threaten Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, this could compromise the relationship between the United States and Egypt (C. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020).¹⁹ As C. Dunne indicates, deepening ties with increased Russian footprint could put the security of United States military technology, communications, and information in jeopardy, creating an untenable situation for continued relations between the two countries. However, Miller cautions that a United States threat to cut off Egypt might persuade the latter to scale back but not shut down its cooperation with Russia, as Egypt will likely want to continue cultivating its ties with both the United States and Russia (and China). Nonetheless, as Miller notes, United States interests may not actually require Egypt to be exclusively partnered with the US.



Violent Crackdowns by the Egyptian State

If Egyptian protests were to reach a scale where they took on the form of a revolt or revolution, Egyptian government crackdowns might be especially brutal, resulting in mass killings (Salem, 2020). Barfi (2020) specifies that a mass killing of civilians perpetrated by the Egyptian military, rather than just the security forces, may be

¹⁸ Miller (2020) suggests that Egypt's purposeful strategy may in fact be to avoid aligning with any one country exclusively (US, Russia, or China), but instead play its relationships with each of the countries off of one another, to its own gain.

¹⁹ Barfi (2020) suggests that changing relations with Russia are generally unlikely to prompt a severe shift in United States policy, though considers the situation where Russia, through its dealings with Egypt, could compromise Israel's Qualitative Military Edge. In this situation, he notes, it is unclear what the United States would do, but pressure from Congress would likely dictate the administration's response.

what would increase the pressure—likely coming from Congress—on the United States to react. Salem (2020) notes, however, that the likelihood that such events would provoke a strong United States response is greater in a US administration with a less positive orientation toward Sisi. M. Dunne (2020) emphasizes that protests alone will not serve as a trigger for a change in US policy or mil-mil restrictions. She points to 2013 protests in Egypt and the lack of an initial United States response as an illustration of this point—highlighting that the mass killing of an estimated 1,000 Egyptians (817 confirmed) in Rabaa [and Nahda] Square a month later was what provoked a United States suspension of military assistance to Egypt lasting approximately 15 months (see also Shakir, 2014). A similar incident could lead the United States to rethink its military relationship with Egypt or suspend it temporarily (M. Dunne, 2020).

Anticipated Egyptian Response to United States Policy Shifts and Mil-Mil Restrictions

It is not in Egypt’s interest to sever its military relations with the United States, due in part to the country’s reliance on American military aid (Salem, 2020; C. Dunne, 2020). Egypt will thus act to maintain the relationship, even in the face of shifting United States foreign policy toward Egypt or temporary reductions in aid. Nonetheless, a more drastic policy shift by the United States, resulting in permanent reduction or termination of aid may prompt a more aggressive response from Egypt, including violations of its ABO agreements.

Egypt Will Generally Act to Preserve Its Relationship with the United States

Though the United States-Egyptian relationship may experience some strains,²⁰ the relationship is an important cornerstone for Egyptian military officials, due in large part to the \$1.3 billion in military aid that Egypt receives from the United States annually (C. Dunne, 2020). As a result, the Egyptian government is expected to weather challenges to the relationship in order to preserve it. For example, as C. Dunne explains, Egypt will endure United States criticism on its human rights record, as well as occasional suspensions or delays in military and economic assistance, before degrading or denying current ABO agreements.

Regional actors are also likely to exert pressure on Egypt to preserve its relationship with the United States and deter it from retaliating against an unfavorable United States policy shift. United States military access to the Gulf is critical for the security not only of Egypt but also of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other regional countries. This suggests that any move by Egypt to deny the United States privileges may be met with pressure from these regional actors to allow the United States military some degree of access to the Suez Canal and overflight routes (C. Dunne, 2020).

Egypt’s handling of its strained relations with the United States in the past further suggests that Egypt will not act to jeopardize its military relationship with the United States. After the United States suspended the transfer

²⁰ Although US President Trump and Egyptian President Sisi maintain a strong relationship, behind the friendly rhetoric, the “political-military transactionalism” that underlies the United States-Egyptian relationship may be fading (C. Dunne, 2019). There is a degree of mutual mistrust and suspicion and a lack of quality mil-mil relations between the nations (Hanna, 2020; Benaim et al., 2017). The United States’ mistrust of Egypt is predicated in part on Egypt’s purchase of 20 Su-35 fighter aircraft from Russia in November 2019 (Sharp, 2019), as well as alleged Egyptian trade and arms transactions conducted with North Korea (Sharp, 2017). Egyptian distrust of the United States is based in part on frustration over United States policy that they feel unfairly singles them out (Benaim et al., 2017), as well as the prevailing assumption that the United States wants to “keep Egyptians down” and “protect the Israeli advantage over them” (Barfi, 2020). Egyptian failure to cooperate with the United States military on counterterrorism efforts in the Sinai illustrates such distrust towards the United States (Hanna, 2020).

of large-scale military systems²¹ to Egypt in October 2013 (Hawthorne, 2014), President Sisi maintained an open and positive position towards the United States, with the intention of eventually restoring the United States and Egypt's military relationship and the lost aid (Salem, 2020). This "long-game" strategy ultimately proved effective, and thus may inform Sisi's future behavior in a similar scenario.

How Likely Is Egypt to Retaliate and How Would It Do So?

Retaliatory action by Egypt in the form of denying or degrading ABO is unlikely during any initial tensions between Egypt and the United States, as Egypt would be motivated to preserve its military relationship (C. Dunne, 2020; Salem, 2020). However, Egypt may respond with ABO limitations to United States-imposed restrictions under certain circumstances (Barfi, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020; Salem, 2020). For example, if the United States were to permanently cut off or severely reduce Egyptian military aid, Egypt would be more likely to respond with aggressive measures such as these (C. Dunne, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020; Miller, 2020).²² Under these conditions, Egypt may even look for an alternative source of aid from nations such as Russia, China, or one of the Gulf states (C. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department Official, 2020; Salem, 2020). If the United States' restriction on aid is perceived by the Egyptians as only being temporary, however, then Egypt would likely be more motivated to try to preserve the relationship in order to regain the lost aid. In such a situation, Egypt might nonetheless choose to be less cooperative with the United States on a day-to-day basis (M. Dunne, 2020). With respect to ABO limitations, the Egyptian response may ultimately depend on the extent and severity of United States restrictions.

Several experts indicate that it is highly unlikely that Egypt would respond to a severe United States policy shift or to mil-mil restrictions by denying the United States access to the Suez Canal (A Former White House and State Department official, 2020; C. Dunne, 2020; Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020). The Suez Canal provides Egypt with hard US currency that supplements the amount that the United States provides in military aid (Hanna, 2020; Miller, 2020). Moreover, selectively denying or privileging Suez passage has offered limited value to Egypt in the past, as Egypt must preserve "the trustworthiness of the canal for commercial vessels and others" (Former White House and State Department official, 2020). Egypt cannot politicize access to the Suez Canal because such restrictions may lead other regional actors to conclude that Egypt could close access to other countries over political disagreements. This might drive them to explore alternative routes instead (Miller, 2020). Lastly, United States military access to the Gulf and North Arabian Sea remains critical for the security of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other regional nations, who have provided critical support to Egypt in the past. Therefore, some level of United States military access to the Suez Canal and overflight routes is imperative to maintain regional security (C. Dunne, 2020).

²¹ These systems included twenty F-16 jets, M1-A1 battle tank kits, twenty Harpoon cruise missiles, and ten Apache attack helicopters (Hawthorne, 2014).

²² Miller (2020) further indicates that, in a situation where the United States only denied some of its aid to Egypt, if Egypt concluded that the United States would accept a decision to restrict airspace and continue providing Egypt with the remainder of the aid, then Egypt would continue curtailing its airspace. If the United States threatened to rescind all of its aid, however, Egypt would likely fold and reopen its airspace.

Recommendations and Implications for USCENTCOM and the USG

Although Egypt arguably is no longer a leading power in the USCENTCOM AOR (Barfi, 2018; C. Dunne, 2019; Miller, 2018), its continued stability is arguably critical both to the Central Region and to the United States, as other nations in the region are growing increasingly fragile as a result of revolts, civil wars, extremist threats, and Iranian intervention (Barfi, 2018). The United States' maintenance of its relationship with Egypt and its demonstrated leadership as Egypt's security guarantor also play a role in great power competition, as any vacuum left by the United States might be filled by United States competitors in the region, such as Russia or China (Hanna, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2017). While the expert contributors are careful to point out that the United States cannot force Egypt's hand, several provide recommendations for how USCENTCOM and the US government (USG) might optimally engage Egypt and help ensure the stability of Egypt as a long-term United States ally. While it may be beyond the purview of USCENTCOM to execute the following recommendations, the implied outcomes of these recommendations may have operational implications for the command.

- **Maintain a leadership position in the region.** The United States should maintain its position as a leader in Egypt and the region more broadly. This leadership is dependent on continued arms deals and the provision of substantial military aid towards Egypt, as a significant reduction or termination of United States aid could force Egypt to pursue capabilities from an alternative source(s), such as China, Russia, and/or Saudi Arabia (C. Dunne, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020; Former White House and State Department official, 2020; Salem, 2020). Furthermore, if another nation were to assume the United States' position as Egypt's security guarantor and provide an alternate source of aid, Egypt may choose to retaliate against an unfavorable shift in United States policy more severely (e.g., by degrading or denying ABO agreements) than if the United States sustained its leadership primacy (Former White House and State Department official, 2020).
- **Reassess the composition and amount of annual United States aid provided to Egypt.** Hanna (2020) suggests that the United States reassess the amount and "precise mix" of resources that it allocates to Egypt, as these have not been reevaluated in decades. This reassessment should coincide with a careful evaluation of the benefits that the relationship with Egypt provides to the United States (Hanna, 2020). According to Barfi, the aid that the United States has been giving Egypt has not had the intended effects; for example, the United States has given Egypt flour and built roads, dams, and schools—none of which, he argues, has helped the country. As part of this evaluation, the United States therefore might consider shifting the focus of both its development and economic aid in addition to military aid to Egypt. Toward that end, both Barfi and M. Dunne emphasize water issues, while M. Dunne emphasizes human development and a shift from large legacy weapons systems to counterterrorism-related systems (Barfi, 2020; Barfi & Dunne, 2018).²³ Barfi (2020) also emphasizes the importance of assisting Egypt in building its private sector and making structural reforms in its economy. Such shifts in aid allocation could help reduce Egypt's economic vulnerability and the potential for political instability (M. Dunne, 2020). Finally, the United States might communicate to Egypt that its aid is not unconditional, but comes with certain expectations, such as general cooperation, in exchange for this assistance (Miller, 2020).

²³ M. Dunne additionally recommends shifting aid toward education. Here, it is unclear whether this suggestion would invoke spending on schools, specifically, or whether the focus would instead be in areas such as teacher training, workforce development, or others.

- **Curtail Egyptian spending on weapons that it does not need and provide proper equipment and training.** To produce the results that the USG intends to see through the provision of its military aid to Egypt, the United States must concentrate on providing Egypt with the proper types of equipment and training for that equipment (Miller, 2020). Moreover, the United States should press Egypt to curtail its spending on high-tech weapons that are not needed and that do not match its threat set (Miller, 2020; Barfi, 2018). Presently, Egypt purchases billions of dollars-worth of military weapons annually; however, it does not face any conventional threats from its regional neighbors (Barfi, 2018). Furthermore, the arms and equipment purchased may not be employed effectively, or even used at all. For example, the Egyptian military has bought over \$1 billion dollars' worth of M1-A1 battle tanks over the past several decades, some of which Egypt has not used (Miller, 2020).
- **Continue to press Egypt on its violations of human rights.** Since his election in 2014, President Sisi's security forces have propagated a campaign of intimidation, violence, and arrests to both silence civilian activists and critics and to crack down on minority groups (Human Rights Watch: Egypt—Events of 2018). Furthermore, Egypt's court systems remain abusive and do not meet minimum due process standards, leaving many accused individuals without a timely hearing or access to due process (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The United States must not condone or approve of these human rights violations in Egypt, to deter other nations in the region from believing that extreme repression is an effective practice (Salem, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020). It also must press Egypt to cease these attacks on Egyptians' personal liberties (Salem, 2020; M. Dunne, 2020).
- **Encourage democratization in Egypt and the Middle East, more broadly.** President Sisi secured his second term in a largely free but unfair presidential election in March 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Egypt's Parliament also voted in February 2019 to grant Sisi the ability to remain in office until as late as 2034, strengthening Sisi's control over the nation (Mahfouz & Raghavan, 2019). In order to prevent another unfair election from occurring in the future, and to encourage a gradual return to a more open, pluralistic Egypt, the United States must continue to press the idea of democratization on Egypt (Salem, 2020) and impress the need to respect the Egyptian Constitution upon President Sisi (Barfi, 2018).

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