

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International  
Terrorism**

**Egypt: Trends in Politics, Economics, and Human Rights  
9 September 2020**

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking member Wilson, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today at this hearing on Egypt's trends in politics, economics and human rights.

The invitation by Chairman Engel for me to testify today highlighted that while Egypt remained an important partner to the United States, the relationship between both countries has become more complicated and fraught in recent years. It further explained the purpose of this hearing as examining the political, economic and human rights dynamics in Egypt. The two statements are closely linked. Despite the U.S. Egyptian alliance being a cornerstone of the American led order in the Middle East since the late 70's, the previous decade has witnessed unprecedented tensions between both countries, leading many to question the value of the alliance. While those tensions have intensified, at their core, they are the result of clear miscalculations and misunderstandings by both parties from the very beginning.

**The U.S. Egyptian Alliance**

The basis of the U.S. Egyptian alliance was formulated by Secretary Kissinger and President Sadat in the aftermath of the 1973 war. Secretary Kissinger hoped to detach Egypt from the Soviet orbit and achieve a lasting peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. Similarly, President Sadat had rightly calculated that Egypt's alliance with the Soviet Union was not helpful for the country's strategic and economic needs. His bet was that an alliance with the United States would help him reach a settlement with Israel leading to the return of occupied Egyptian territory. Equally important, President Sadat hoped that U.S. economic aid would help Egypt achieve economic progress.

But behind the meeting of interests, was a miscalculation by both Washington and Cairo. This miscalculation would only become more apparent over the following decades and continues until today. In Washington, Egypt's role in the Middle East was misunderstood. The United States viewed Egypt as the leading player in the Arabic speaking world based on its historical role as the region's political, intellectual and cultural capital. Washington hoped that Egypt would lead the region to peace just as it had led it to war.

The assumption, however, ignored the reality of Egypt's diminishing capacity to play a role in the region following the 1967 war, as well as the rising Egyptian nationalism that was central to President Sadat's detachment with his predecessor's Arab policies. While it is fashionable to associate Egypt's regional decline with the Mubarak era, in reality it was President Nasser in the Khartoum Summit in 1967 that had accepted that reality by agreeing to withdraw from Yemen and giving up on Egyptian efforts to topple other Arab regimes in return for Gulf support for the buildup of the Egyptian military. Similarly, Egypt's fatigue with involvement in Arab affairs was a direct result of the price the country paid due to those adventures. The United States was betting on an Egypt that no longer existed.

Cairo similarly misunderstood its alliance with the United States. On the economic front, Egypt miscalculated the ability of the United States to transform the Egyptian economy, as it had hoped. The United States was not at fault here, generously providing aid, and the reasons for Egypt's inability to achieve economic development lie squarely with the country's economic policies. But for Egypt, U.S. aid was never enough, especially as economic aid declined in the following decades.

More importantly, from the Egyptian perspective, the alliance was one solely based on foreign policy and did not include domestic affairs. Egypt believed that it had already paid its entry price for the alliance through accepting to sign a separate peace agreement with Israel, leading to a complete boycott of Egypt by its Arab neighbors. Hence the country did not expect and never accepted the idea that further requests would be placed by the United States regarding the Egyptian regime's domestic policies from issues of democratization to human rights.

These misunderstandings only deepened in the following decades and are central to the worsening relationship between both countries. While many in Washington today acknowledge Egypt's limited potential for playing a constructive regional role, the very idea of Egypt as a trend setter remains prominent driven by romantic views of Egypt's history with democracy replacing peace as the desired outcome. Egypt's divergence from those hopes has left many in Washington disappointed. The list of complaints is long: Egypt's failing war on terrorism, repression of all forms of dissent, dismal record on human rights, failure to transition to democracy as many had hoped, President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi's obsession with megaprojects, and Egypt's regional and foreign policy—from its support for the Syrian dictator to its embrace of Libyan general Khalifa Haftar and alignment with Russia including buying Russian weapons.

But in any reassessment of the relationship is to be conducted, it must also acknowledge Cairo's disappointments with the United States. From the Egyptian perspective, Washington has failed to provide Egypt with the advanced weapons needed to meet the country's growing and complex security challenges, pressured the Mubarak regime on democratization and called on him to step down, engaged under the Obama administration with the Muslim Brotherhood, refusing to acknowledge the popular discontent against it, and continuously threatens to cut aid to Egypt. This has

led Egypt to conclude that the United States is not a reliable ally and to hedge its bets elsewhere.

While the relationship between both countries has improved under the Trump administration, this has not been the result of a solution to the existing misunderstandings and disagreements, but instead they have been the result of the Trump administration bypassing those questions, while adjusting the Obama administration's policies regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. While Egypt has welcomed those changes, it has failed to address any of Washington's concerns. Egypt's continued and deepening ties with Russia illustrate that it still views the relationship as unreliable. This makes any existing improvement only temporarily and delays the inevitable reckoning with the relationship's inherent misunderstandings.

As unfortunate as the worsening relationship may be, some in Washington have come to view an end to the alliance as inevitable. Egypt does not simply matter as it did in the past, and any further worsening in the relationship will not impact U.S. strategic objectives in the region. Furthermore, the services provided to the United States by the Egyptian government from securing speedy passage through the Suez Canal, to military flights in Egyptian airspace are either not as important as before or likely to be maintained. The central piece of the alliance, maintaining the peace treaty with Israel will also be upheld no matter what as it is in Egypt's national interest to do so.

But if the old rationale for the relationship is no longer present, this does not mean that Egypt no longer matters. As the American led order in the Middle East crumbles, the region has been engulfed in fire from civil wars to state collapse. This has had devastating effects not just on the Middle East, but also on Europe as the Syrian refugee crisis illustrates. While Egypt has long been viewed as distinct from the region in terms of its strong national identity and hence stability of the state, there is no reason to believe that the country is immune to the regional dynamics that have led other Arabic speaking countries to collapse. Preventing such an outcome in Egypt is of vital importance.

A readjustment of the relationship is vital. That readjustment must begin by acknowledging the mistakes of the previous decades, and redefining U.S. objectives in Egypt.

### **Egypt's Political Landscape**

Under President Sisi, the Egyptian regime has sought to completely close up public space to politics. In the regime's assessment, this is a correction to President Mubarak's policies in his last decade in power of opening up the country, which they believe to have contributed to his downfall. Believing that while the 2011 revolution was partially the result of legitimate popular discontent, it was utilized by sinister forces seeking to undermine Egypt through funding for civil society organizations and an open press, the regime has sought to close down civil society organizations and completely control the media. Nonetheless, the regime is more attuned to popular sentiment expressed on

social media than its predecessors, as it views social media as contributing to the 2011 uprising.

While Washington saw the events of 2011-2013 as a struggle for democracy, the Egyptian military viewed it as a power struggle with a group, the Muslim Brotherhood, that rejected the nation state and sought to align Egypt with a transnational Islamist project. The Muslim Brotherhood conduct in power, from its attempt to grab power, refusal to govern in a broad national coalition, passing a new constitution without the consent of all of the country's non-Islamist parties, sectarian incitement that resulted in the murder of Shi'as and increasing attacks on Copts, release of Jihadis from prisons and lack of interest in confronting the growing terrorist threat in Sinai, and finally its openness to get Egypt militarily involved in the Syrian conflict, were all alarming signs for the military as well as to the country's non-Islamist population. The result was a meeting of interests whose outcome was both a massive protest and a military coup putting the country on its current trajectory.

President Sisi is often described as averse to democracy, but his aversion goes much deeper. Unlike all of Egypt's previous presidents, Sisi had no experience or training in national politics prior to assuming high office. The president who emerged from the barracks is thus averse not only to democracy, but to the very practice of politics, as he disdains negotiations and compromise, cutting deals, and developing a program. After the revolution, the squabble for power among Egypt's politicians and their failure to offer the people any practicable agenda reinforced Sisi's belief that politicians serve only themselves and care little about the nation. Thus, under his rule, President Sisi has aimed to remove politics from the public square, to delegitimize Parliament and civil society, and to monopolize the policy discussion.

The recent Senate elections in Egypt which are being concluded as we speak are a testament to that mindset. A completely controlled process by the security services, the elections, if they can be termed as such, included no opposition figures. No list besides the government sanctioned one was allowed to compete allowing the government list to win all 100 seats allocated. The elections were held amidst complete public apathy with an official participation rate of 14 percent. A similar approach is likely to be followed in the parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of this year. Opposition figures such as Zyad El-elaimy and independent intellectuals such as Omar El Shenety who were planning to form a coalition to compete in those elections under the banner of the Coalition of Hope have been jailed. While the current parliament was similarly controlled, it included a handful of members who showed dissent, leading the regime to use various tools to silence them from intimidating media campaigns to expelling them from parliament as happened to Mohamed Anwar Esmat El Sadat. The regime is thus likely to seek a more controlled parliament excluding any figures that may show signs of independence.

## **The Human Rights Landscape**

Under President Sisi, Egypt has witnessed severe human rights violations. Tens of thousands of Egyptians have been arrested and torture is rampant as a means of gaining confessions and as a form of punishment. While Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies, have been the main target of those repressive measures, the regime has also targeted all forms of dissent from non-Islamists.

A case to point is that of Ramy Kamel, a Coptic activist whose work solely focuses on exposing persecution of Copts in Egypt. Arrested in November 2019, Ramy still sits in an Egyptian prison with no crime but his efforts to highlight facts pertaining to the situation of Christians in Egypt which the regime finds uncomfortable as it contradicts its claims of being a protector of Christians. Ramy's case has been documented and highlighted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

In 2016, the Egyptian parliament finally passed a church building law, after years of successive Egyptian regimes promising to do so. The law is extremely problematic and includes language that makes it nearly impossible to construct a new church in Egypt, but was supported by Egypt's various Christian denominations because it promised to give official recognition to existing churches that have been constructed illegally. In September 2017, Egypt's Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches submitted the papers for 3730 churches and church associated buildings to the government committee as required by law. Four years later only 1638 permits have been approved.

While President Sisi has taken some symbolic steps towards Copts such as building a Cathedral in Egypt's new capital project and visiting the Coptic Cathedral on Christmas eve, and while he has also taken some meaningful steps in appointing two Copts to the position of Governor, conditions on the ground for Copts remain the same. Mob attacks on Copts continue and face no legal punishment. The regime continues to use reconciliation sessions that have resulted in a culture of impunity and encouragement to those attacking Copts.

## **The Economic Landscape**

In the past few years, and as a result of structural reforms, and devaluation of the Egyptian pound, pushed for by the International Monetary Fund, Egypt's economy has achieved high growth rates. While the Covid-19 has impacted the Egyptian economy, especially in regards to foreign currency flows from the Suez Canal and tourism, the crisis has not severely damaged the economy, which is likely to continue growing despite the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the Egyptian economy continues to suffer from a multitude of structural problems. The subsidy burden remains high and with a state bureaucracy of seven million, salaries are a serious burden on the state budget. The Egyptian government has attempted to answer its financial problems through heavily borrowing both internally and externally and the services of these debts are huge.

Moreover, the weakness of the educational system which does not prepare Egyptians for a modern economy continues to limit any progress made. Egypt has a low worker productivity, an arcane legal structure despite attempt to make it more business friendly, and a huge informal economy that the government has failed to regulate.

The Egyptian regime continues to depend on the military for both economic activities as well as filling high ranking government positions. This is the result of deep mistrust of civilians and non-government-controlled business ventures. The military continues to be President Sisi's go-to body for implementing all of his mega projects. This has severely restricted the ability of private businesses to operate as they compete on an uneven field with a military that controls the country's uninhabited lands, has a large and unpaid labor force in the form of conscripts, is exempted from taxes and custom duties for its imports.

### **The Security Landscape**

Egypt is today in its eighth year of fighting terrorism in Sinai. Despite all of the military's efforts against the Islamic State affiliate in Sinai, and despite security and intelligence cooperation with Israel, the terrorist threat shows no signs of being defeated. While the Islamic State in Sinai has lost the ability in the past two years of carrying spectacular attacks, and has also been unable to carry major attacks in mainland Egypt, it continues to be able to conduct attacks on Egyptian forces with heavy casualties.

The regime has had much more success in addressing the terrorist threat in mainland Egypt. Terrorist cells that have emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood have been defeated. The Muslim Brotherhood affiliate support network has been decapitated. Egypt has also had enormous success in dealing with the terrorist threat from Al Qaeda in Libya. Through cooperation with General Haftar's forces, these terrorist networks have been killed or arrested.

### **Egypt's Foreign Policy Challenges**

Two major foreign policy challenges occupy Egypt: Libya and Ethiopia. In Libya, Egypt's objective has often been understood as ending the civil war with a victory for General Haftar's forces. In reality, Egypt's objectives are more modest: securing the country's western borders from any threat coming from Libya. This minimalist policy was achieving the desired result prior to the Turkish intervention in Libya. This intervention poses a direct threat to Egypt's national security and has driven President Sisi to draw a red line in Libya roughly in the middle of the country and threaten military intervention if that red line is crossed. In Libya, Egypt has found allies in the United Arab Emirates, France, and Russia.

Libya is merely one front in the ongoing struggle between Egypt and Turkey. Turkey continues to host Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist operatives who are given a free rein to incite for violence in Egypt through their satellite channels. Egypt has found

an ally in Greece and Cyprus and the three countries have embarked on various cooperative ventures especially regarding gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Ethiopian Dam project continues to be the largest long-term threat to Egypt's national security. While Egypt has come to acknowledge Ethiopian development needs, thorny issues regarding the Dam project remain and have led Egypt to both ask the United States for help in mediating the conflict as well as resorting to the Security Council. While the potential of war with Ethiopia is unlikely given the military limitations as well as its long-term effects on Egypt's relationships with African countries, the Dam conflict remains a potential crisis that can escalate quickly.

Egypt's deepening relationship with Russia has often been viewed as simply a balancing act by Cairo and a source of military hardware denied by Washington. In reality, Egypt's relationship with Russia is much deeper and a reflection of both economic realities and personal bias. At the height of Egypt's tourism success before the 2011 revolution, three million Russians visited Egypt every year representing 20 percent of all tourists. The return of Russian tourism is thus a key priority for Egypt. But more importantly, President Sisi views President Putin as a model for saving a once great country from its collapse. Unlike earlier generations of Egyptian military officers that had come to view the Soviet Union as both a failure as well as colonizers, leading them to support President Sadat's policy shift, this generation of Egyptian military officers do not view Russia similarly and instead view it as a partner and model. Russian propaganda efforts in Arabic have been very successful in creating a pro-Russian constituency in Egypt.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Any attempt by the United States to engage Egypt and change the regime's behavior must take note of the deep animosity and suspicion that the regime as well as the population at large have towards the United States. More than everything else, the fact that despite billions of dollars spent, at the moment of truth, there was no constituency in Egypt defending the bilateral relationship and alliance is the ultimate indictment of previous U.S. policy.

In attempting to work with Egypt on issues of mutual interest and change the regime's behavior in terms of freedoms and human rights, the United States must acknowledge its limited leverage on Cairo. While the military aid is still significant, its value has decreased over the years. Simply put, no cut in U.S. aid would change Cairo's behavior on matters that the regime views as life and death issues. For example, no amount of aid could pressure the Egyptian regime to reconcile with the Muslim Brotherhood, if that was even a desirable policy objective for the United States.

Nonetheless, the alliance and military aid does bring the United States some leverage that can be utilized in areas where the regime survival is not at stake.

Some areas of engaging Egypt and impacting the country's trajectory are thus possible:

Anti-Americanism remains rampant in Egypt and takes the form of conspiracy theories regarding the United States intentions towards Egypt. The Egyptian regime should both publicly repudiate those sentiments as well as refrain from spreading them through their controlled media apparatus. If Cairo values its alliance with Washington, President Sisi should make the case himself to the Egyptian people of why this alliance is important and how the United States continues to help Egypt.

The United States for its part should penalize Egyptians who deliberately create and propagate anti-American conspiracy theories. For example, Washington could make perpetrators ineligible to participate in American-Egyptian exchange programs, receive funding from the U.S. government, or receive visas to visit the U.S. But beyond that the United States should focus its public diplomacy efforts in Egypt on debunking those conspiracy theories. Washington's efforts to help Egypt deal with the Ethiopian Dam project have created some goodwill in Cairo. This goodwill should be capitalized on in both private outreach to the Egyptian government as well as in public diplomacy efforts to the Egyptian people.

While a complete rollback of repressive measures by the Egyptian regime may be unexpected, the United States should continue to raise these issues with Egypt. Egypt's harassment, arrest and imprisonment of American citizens must end, and Egypt should be informed that this is not the conduct of an ally. Cairo can take some measures to build good will by releasing some figures from jail who pose no threat to the regime such as Zyad Elelaimy, Omar El Shenety and Ramy Kamel.

Education reform is a key area that deserves the focus of the United States. The U.S. needs to rethink and expand its longstanding educational mission in Egypt to address the country's educational deficit and decaying state institutions, as well as deepening ties to the Egyptian people. The United States should also support attempts at reforming the educational curriculum to address problems of intolerance, radicalization and extremism in the Egyptian educational system. Special attention should be given to the educational system controlled by Al Azhar, which includes about a quarter of Egypt's high school students, and which continues to teach intolerance to non-Muslims and helps radicalize students. This is essential for winning the struggle of ideas with Islamism, establishing civic peace, and fostering progress.

The Egyptian regime should address the causes for the ongoing discrimination and persecution of Coptic Christians. Egypt should be required to uphold the rule of law in cases of mob attacks on Copts and end the practice of reconciliation sessions and the culture of impunity they create as House Resolution 49 requires. The Egyptian government's delaying tactics in giving approval to existing churches should be changed.

American military aid to Egypt should focus on improving Egypt's capacity to conduct complex political-military operations at home and along its periphery. In addition, the United States should reexamine its military education and exchange programs with



Egyptian officers. While some military training initiatives target lower-ranking officers, the important and coveted strategic studies programs engage only top commanders. Expanding programs for the lower ranks on counterinsurgency, civilian security, and intelligence practices based on rule-of-law principles should be a top priority.

In its economic and development aid to Egypt, the United States should develop a local approach that rewards governorates and municipalities based on metrics related to good governance and equal opportunities for all citizens.

The United States should encourage the government of Turkey to examine the content of Muslim Brotherhood TV channels engaged in incitement and support for terrorist attacks in Egypt. It should further encourage the government of Turkey to examine ties between individuals residing in Turkey and terrorist activities in Egypt.

Thank you again for holding and chairing this hearing and I look forwards to your questions.