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## Hope versus Reality: The Efficacy of Using US Military Aid to Improve Human Rights in Egypt

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**ABSTRACT:** Using US military aid as a lever to achieve human rights reforms has proven only marginally effective. This article examines the approaches employed by the Obama and Trump administrations to US military aid to Egypt and proposes practical steps that can be taken by policymakers and the military personnel on the ground to advance US human rights values.

**F**or the past 20 years there has been mounting controversy over the annual \$1.3 billion US security assistance package to Egypt. Critics have complained the aid rewards the Egyptian government for repressive behavior and human rights violations. Total US aid to Egypt is roughly \$1.425 billion a year, of which about \$125 million is civilian economic aid.<sup>1</sup> Supporters say it is necessary to protect Egypt from real threats, maintain the peace between Egypt and Israel, and provide the United States with influence in Egypt, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, a growing number of voices in think tank and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) have advocated for cutting the aid, in whole or in part, in reaction to the authoritarian practices of the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Some estimates show Egypt may have as many as 60,000 political prisoners, nonviolent and violent alike.<sup>3</sup> Many supporters who have pressed for this tougher line claim US military aid, which in 2005 accounted for as much as 80 percent of Egypt's military procurement

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1. Lama Al-Arian, "U.S. Military Aid to Egypt Gives a 'Green Light' to Repression, Say Rights Advocates," NPR, August 8, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/08/635381440/u-s-military-aid-to-egypt-gives-a-green-light-to-repression-say-rights-advocates>; and US Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2022*, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FY-2022-State\\_USAID-Congressional-Budget-Justification.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FY-2022-State_USAID-Congressional-Budget-Justification.pdf). See also William D. Hartung and Seth Binder, *U.S. Security Assistance to Egypt: Examining the Return on Investment* (Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Democracy and Center for International Policy, May 2020), <https://pomed.org/report-u-s-security-assistance-to-egypt-examining-the-return-on-investment/>.

2. Bruce Clingan, "Commentary: The U.S. Is Right to Restore Aid to Egypt," Reuters, July 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-clingan-egypt-commentary/commentary-the-u-s-is-right-to-restore-aid-to-egypt-idUSKBN1KK1YE>.

3. See Ruth Michaelson, "Threat of Jail Looms over Even Mildest Critics under Egyptian Crackdown," *Guardian*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/24/threat-of-jail-shapes-egyptian-lives-nine-years-after-uprising>.

budget, gives the United States significant leverage.<sup>4</sup> These advocates believe the aid should be used as a pressure point on the Egyptian government, by threatening a cut in aid or by making an actual cut in aid, to compel the government to adhere to human rights norms.

In recent years, some suspensions of military aid to Egypt have taken place under successive US administrations (first under the Obama administration and then under the Trump administration), which should give a sense of whether such suspensions have been effective. Leveraging US military aid for improvements in human rights have not proven effective historically, and this article will provide alternative policy recommendations.

### Obama Administration Approach

The Obama administration was confronted with a major crisis on July 3, 2013, when Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted in a military coup by then defense minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>5</sup> This coup was supported by millions of liberal and secular-minded Egyptians who opposed what they believed was the incompetence of Morsi's rule and the fear he would turn Egypt into a theocratic state.<sup>6</sup>

The Obama administration was "deeply concerned" about Morsi's removal and the suspension of the Egyptian constitution. Despite Morsi's many shortcomings, as he was the first democratically elected president in Egypt, the administration wanted to show its support for Egypt's democratic transition.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Obama administration avoided using the term coup because that recognition would have automatically cut off all US military aid to Egypt under the Leahy Law, which prohibits funding of a foreign government brought to power by a military coup. The administration clearly wanted to keep its options open as it assessed the situation, particularly as the coup was initially popular with a large segment of the Egyptian population. Both US and EU diplomats traveled to Cairo that summer to convince the new Egyptian authorities to release Morsi, but to no avail.<sup>8</sup>

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4. US Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Report to the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Security Assistance: State and DOD Need to Assess How Foreign Military Financing Program for Egypt Achieves U.S. Foreign Policy and Security Goals*, GAO-06-437 (Washington, DC: GAO, April 2006), 2, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/250/249655.pdf>.

5. Dan Roberts, "US in Bind over Egypt after Supporting Morsi but Encouraging Protesters," *Guardian*, July 3, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/03/egypt-obama-us-mohamed-morsi-crisis>.

6. David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egyptian Liberals Embrace the Military, Brooking No Dissent," *New York Times*, July 15, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/world/middleeast/egypt-morsi.html>.

7. Jennifer Epstein, "Obama 'Deeply Concerned' by Egyptian Military's Removal of Morsi," POLITICO44 (blog), *Politico*, July 3, 2013, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/politico44/2013/07/obama-deeply-concerned-by-egyptian-militarys-removal-of-morsi-167603>.

8. "State Department Calls for Morsi's Release," CNN, updated July 13, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/12/world/meast/egypt-coup>.

Violence, however, appeared to have forced the administration's hand. On July 8, clashes occurred in front of the Republican Guard building in Cairo (where Morsi was thought to be held) and at least 51 protestors (mostly Muslim Brotherhood activists) and three members of the security forces were killed.<sup>9</sup> That incident, and Sisi's unwillingness to restore the constitution and release Morsi, apparently prompted the Obama administration to suspend the delivery of F-16 aircraft that had been slated for Egypt, which prompted Sisi to complain to a *Washington Post* journalist that the holdup was "not the way to deal with a patriotic military."<sup>10</sup>

A violent mid-August crackdown on two large, pro-Morsi protest encampments in the Cairo area then set off a sharp crisis in bilateral relations, resulting in over 800 deaths in a single day.<sup>11</sup> This crisis was followed by more arrests of Brotherhood activists and members in subsequent weeks. Obama interrupted his vacation to condemn the harsh crackdown, cancel the US-Egyptian Bright Star military exercises that had been scheduled for the following month, and promise to order a thorough review of US assistance to Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

Within the administration there was a vigorous debate on how the United States should respond to the crisis. In October 2013, the administration decided a significant portion of US military aid would be suspended to signal US dissatisfaction with Sisi's harsh policies and to lay down markers on what actions would be required for the aid to be restored. In the words of a US State Department spokesperson: "We will continue to hold the delivery of certain large-scale military systems and cash assistance to the government pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections."<sup>13</sup> A few weeks earlier in an address to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, Obama criticized the new Egyptian government for actions "inconsistent with inclusive democracy."<sup>14</sup> The military aid suspension, however, proved ineffective.

Rather than heeding the rationale for the suspension, the Egyptian regime grew more repressive. On November 24, 2013, the government implemented a new protest law that, in the words of Human Rights Watch, "effectively grants security

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9. Patrick Kingsley, "Killing in Cairo: The Full Story of the Republican Guards' Club Shootings," *Guardian*, July 18, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/jul/18/cairo-republican-guard-shooting-full-story>.

10. Lally Weymouth, "Harsh Words for U.S. from Egypt," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2013.

11. Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protestors in Egypt* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 2014), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-to-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt#>.

12. Steve Holland and Jeff Mason, "Obama Cancels Military Exercises, Condemns Violence in Egypt," Reuters, August 15, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-protests-obama/obama-cancels-military-exercises-condemns-violence-in-egypt-idUSBRE97E0N020130816>.

13. "US Withholds Egypt Military Aid over Crackdown," BBC, October 10, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24470121>.

14. Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," (annual address, United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2013), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

officials discretion to ban any protest on vague grounds, allows police officers to forcibly disperse any protest if even a single protestor throws a stone, and sets heavy prison sentences for vague offenses.”<sup>15</sup> Adly Mansour, the titular head of the government, defined such a vague offense as attempting to “influence the course of justice.”<sup>16</sup> The following month the government officially designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and seized the assets of Brotherhood-owned businesses.<sup>17</sup>

Cushioning the blow from the suspension of most US military aid was the cash windfall Egypt received from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait shortly after the military coup in the summer of 2013—an estimated \$12 billion in total.<sup>18</sup> This figure dwarfed the US security aid package of \$1.3 billion and enabled Sisi to purchase military equipment from other sources, including Russia and France.<sup>19</sup> Supporters of the US aid suspension claim that without this aid from the three wealthy Gulf Arab states, Sisi would have succumbed to US pressure, but that belief seems to have been based on wishful thinking given the size of the Gulf aid package.

The combination of national pride and perceived threats have long made Egypt a difficult partner of the United States. Even during the Hosni Mubarak era, there were instances where Cairo refused to follow the US lead, probably believing that, by doing so, the government would be accused of being a toady of Washington and ignoring the public’s will.<sup>20</sup> In late 2013, there was every indication to believe that even if the Gulf Arab money did not materialize, Sisi and his military and civilian allies would have continued their repression of the Brotherhood in the face of the US aid suspension as they saw that Islamist group as an existential threat. This is not to say the Egyptian government was happy with the suspension of US military aid. Indeed, Cairo hired public relations firms in Washington to try to get the suspension lifted. The Egyptian military has been US-trained and

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15. “Egypt: Deeply Restrictive New Assembly Law,” Human Rights Watch, November 26, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/26/egypt-deeply-restrictive-new-assembly-law>.

16. “Egypt: Deeply Restrictive New Assembly Law.”

17. Erin Cunningham, “Egypt’s Military-Backed Government Declares Muslim Brotherhood a Terrorist Organization,” *Washington Post*, December 25, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/egypts-military-backed-government-declares-muslim-brotherhood-a-terrorist-organization/2013/12/25/7cf075ca-6da0-11e3-aecc-85cb037b7236\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypts-military-backed-government-declares-muslim-brotherhood-a-terrorist-organization/2013/12/25/7cf075ca-6da0-11e3-aecc-85cb037b7236_story.html).

18. Jeremy Ravinsky, “Friends Again? Saudi Arabia, UAE Jump into Aid Egypt,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 10, 2013, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-Issues/2013/0710/Friends-again-Saudi-Arabia-UAE-jump-in-to-aid-Egypt>.

19. Congressional Research Service (CRS), *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report RL33003 (Washington, DC: CRS), updated June 7, 2018), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33003/104>.

20. John Lancaster, “Mubarak Deprecates Summit,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 1996, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/10/02/mubarak-deprecates-summit/c81bc595-d936-433c-ab0e-ebbcc86fc419/>.

equipped for many decades, and it is not easy to switch to another foreign military benefactor, as was the case after the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty when Cairo switched from a Soviet-supplied military to an American-supplied one.<sup>21</sup>

During the suspension (about 18 months), then US Secretary of State John Kerry walked a fine line by maintaining good relations with Egyptian authorities while imploring Cairo to improve human rights.<sup>22</sup> His softer diplomatic approach, however, did not lessen the repression either. The only concession the Egyptian government made *after* the aid suspension period was the release of a dual US-Egyptian citizen, Mohamed Soltan, who had been arrested during the August 2013 crackdown on the Brotherhood. Although Soltan's father was a member of the Brotherhood, Soltan himself was not and he was considered by the State Department to have been unjustly arrested.<sup>23</sup> His case became a priority for the White House, and Sisi probably believed that releasing Soltan was a low-cost way to mollify the Obama administration.

By late March 2015, the Obama administration essentially backed down and restored the suspended US military aid. The only punitive measure retained was the suspension of cash-flow financing, a mechanism that allowed Egypt to pay for US defense items in partial installments rather than in one lump sum.<sup>24</sup> The administration's decision to restore aid was likely due to Egypt's need to respond more effectively to the surging terrorist insurgency in the Sinai (though the Egyptian government's heavy-handed practices in the Sinai were often counterproductive) and the realization that the aid suspension did not reverse the government's repressive practices as hoped.<sup>25</sup>

## Trump Administration Approach

President Donald Trump initially took an opposite approach to the Sisi government, though he too would later attempt to use military aid as a lever against the Egyptian government. As a presidential candidate, Trump first met Sisi in September 2016 when the latter was in New York for the UN General

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21. Erin Quinn, "U.S. Lobbying, PR Firms Give Human Rights Abusers a Friendly Face," Center for Public Integrity, December 17, 2015, <https://publicintegrity.org/politics/u-s-lobbying-pr-firms-give-human-rights-abusers-a-friendly-face/>.

22. John Kerry, "Remarks with Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry after Their Meeting," (remarks, Cairo, June 22, 2014), US Department of State transcript, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/228234.htm>.

23. Rubina Kapil, "Ohio State Alumnus Receives Life Sentence in an Egyptian Prison," *Lantern*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.thelantern.com/2015/04/ohio-state-alumnus-receives-life-sentence-in-an-egyptian-prison/>.

24. CRS, *Egypt*.

25. Gregory Aftandilian, "Egypt's Sinai Struggle Not Going Away Anytime Soon," Al Jazeera, February 19, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/02/egypt-sinai-struggle-anytime-150218051345497.html>.



Assembly. The two leaders reportedly got along well, due to a mutual antipathy toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Trump also wanted to be seen as the anti-Obama and believed it was important to embrace Sisi rather than to keep him at arms' length. At this meeting, Trump referred to Sisi as a "fantastic guy."<sup>26</sup>

Trump's good relationship with Sisi was initially used to obtain the release of a dual US-Egyptian citizen and her husband from prison, but that event did not lead to any overall human rights improvement in the country. After Trump became president, Sisi was invited to the White House where Trump praised him as a "great friend and ally" who was doing "a fantastic job in a very difficult situation."<sup>27</sup> Trump clearly saw Sisi as a tough guy who would forcefully deal with threats to Egypt. Trump only alluded to a "little problem" that he hoped Sisi would take care of. The problem was later revealed to be the case of dual US-Egyptian citizen, Aya Hijazi, who ran an NGO in Cairo and who was imprisoned along with her husband on bogus charges. Trump, after the urgings of some members of Congress and human rights groups, took up this case and persuaded Sisi to release Hijazi and her husband. They were later received in the White House, which Trump touted as a great foreign policy success.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, Sisi again believed releasing these two individuals would mollify the US president and be a low-cost way to stay in his good graces. Trump reportedly did not take up the cause of the thousands of other political prisoners in Egypt in this or subsequent meetings.

In August 2017, the Trump administration, much to the surprise of the human rights community, suspended about \$195 million in US military aid to Egypt over Egypt's alleged military assistance to North Korea (at a time when the Trump administration was ratcheting up pressure on that communist country) and made the decision to move ahead with a draconian NGO law, which restricts the activity of these organizations to only development and social work and imposes a five-year prison term for those who do not comply with it.<sup>29</sup> The inclusion of the latter was reportedly driven by the State Department which, institutionally, had long bristled at Sisi's repressive policies.

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26. Cristiano Lima, "Trump Praises Egypt's al-Sisi: 'He's a Fantastic Guy,'" *Politico*, September 22, 2016.

27. Peter Baker and Declan Walsh, "Trump Shifts Course on Egypt, Praising Its Authoritarian Leader," *New York Times*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/03/world/middleeast/egypt-sisi-trump-white-house.html>.

28. Philip Rucker and Karen DeYoung, "Freed Egyptian American Prisoner Returns Home Following Trump Intervention," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/freed-egyptian-american-prisoner-returns-home-following-trump-intervention/2017/04/20/d569fe1e-2608-11e7-bb9d-8cd6118e1409\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/freed-egyptian-american-prisoner-returns-home-following-trump-intervention/2017/04/20/d569fe1e-2608-11e7-bb9d-8cd6118e1409_story.html).

29. Joshua Keating, "Wait, Does the Trump Administration Care about Human Rights Now?" *Slate*, August 23, 2017, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/08/trump-administration-suspends-aid-to-egypt-in-unexpected-move.html>; and "Egypt Defends NGO Law U.S. Senators Call a Draconian Rights Crackdown," Reuters, May 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-rights-usa/egypt-defends-ngo-law-u-s-senators-call-a-draconian-rights-crackdown-idUSKBN18S3KA>.

Like in the Obama administration, the aid suspension did not last long—this time about 11 months. In July 2018, the State Department announced the aid suspension had been lifted. An unnamed department official did not cite any specific steps Sisi had taken to improve human rights but instead emphasized that “preserving U.S. security cooperation with Egypt” was a main reason the funds were released.<sup>30</sup>

Although the State Department under the Trump administration had reportedly raised human rights with the Sisi government in private, the temporary suspension of US military aid in 2017–18 did nothing to improve the overall human rights situation in the country. Thousands of political prisoners still languished behind bars, bloggers and journalists continued to be arrested for criticizing the government, and several potential Egyptian presidential candidates in late 2017 and early 2018 were either arrested or forced to drop out of the race so Sisi would have no serious competition for reelection.<sup>31</sup> The one consolation was that Egypt may have scaled back its assistance to North Korea, though the details of these ties were largely out of the public domain.<sup>32</sup>

In spring 2020, reports surfaced that the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs of the State Department was in favor of suspending up to \$300 million in US military aid in reaction to the January 2020 death in custody of dual US-Egyptian citizen, Mustafa Kassem. Kassem had been incarcerated for six years before going on a hunger strike and dying from medical complications.<sup>33</sup> After hearing the news of Kassem’s death, David Schenker, the head of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, called it “needless, tragic, and avoidable,” and vowed to continue to take up the cause of human rights and imprisoned Americans in Egypt “at every opportunity.”<sup>34</sup> His apparent effort to once again use US military aid as a lever on Egypt, however, did not gain traction inside the administration.

Hence, there were some similarities between the Obama and Trump administrations on the issue of human rights and Egypt. While Obama occasionally spoke out against Sisi’s repression, Trump did not, preferring to leave such things to subordinates. Unfortunately, these examples show Washington has little influence

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30. “U.S. Lifts Restrictions on \$195 Million in Military Aid for Egypt: Official,” Reuters, July 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-egypt-aid/us-lifts-restrictions-on-195-million-in-military-aid-for-egypt-official-idUSKBN1KF2UU>.

31. “Ahmed Shafiq: Egyptian Ex-PM Withdraws from Election,” BBC News, January 7, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42597803>.

32. Andrew Miller, “Commentary: Five Myths about U.S. Aid to Egypt,” Reuters, August 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-miller-egypt-commentary/commentary-five-myths-about-u-s-aid-to-egypt-idUSKBN1KY1WJ>.

33. Jack Detsch, Robbie Gramer, and Colum Lynch, “After Death of U.S. Citizen, State Department Floats Slashing Egypt Aid,” *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/31/egypt-us-military-aid-middle-east-trump-sisi-congress-death-mustafa-kassem-american-citizen-detained/>.

34. David Schenker, “Special Briefing: Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker,” (briefing, Washington, DC, January 13, 2020), US Department of State transcript, <https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-for-near-eastern-affairs-david-schenker-2/>.



over Egyptian state repression—aid suspension or not. The most the Egyptian government has been willing to do under US pressure is to free some dual citizens from prison, however, these releases have not improved the overall human rights climate in the country.

### A Values-Based Approach to US Aid

The above analysis presents a rather sober assessment of the limits of US influence to make friendly but repressive governments adhere to human rights norms, and this situation is not just confined to Egypt. It should be noted that in the post–World War II era, when the United States became a major player in the Middle East, there were periods when human rights were not even on the agenda, as anticommunism and the Arab-Israeli conflict dominated the discussion. At other times, human rights may have been among the talking points of US officials, but the topic was not in the top tier of issues. Moreover, governments like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain became adept at withstanding pressure on human rights, when that issue did emerge as a US priority, either by patiently waiting out the salience of the issue for a US administration or by playing the so-called strategic card. For example, Bahrain, a country that has long repressed its Shiite majority population, has been able to withstand US pressure and even some suspensions of particular US military items by hosting the US Fifth Fleet and playing up the Iran threat.

Understandably, American think-tank specialists and human-rights activists have placed much focus on Egypt because of its central position in the Middle East, its close relations with the United States since the late 1970s, the relatively large amount of US military aid the country continues to receive, and the repressive policies of the Sisi government that have received significant media attention.

Given that Washington has limited influence on the overall human rights situation in the Middle East and that strategic issues such as cooperation on counterterrorism will remain important for the United States, what should US leaders do in the case of Egypt? US policymakers should pursue realistic goals. Eliminating the entire US military aid package, as some activists have advocated, would be counterproductive, as it would likely end any influence Washington does have with Cairo, while other players, like Russia, would be more than happy to step in. Moscow has already begun to supply Egypt with some weaponry, reactivating Egyptian–Russian ties that were close from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, a cutoff of all US military aid could potentially hurt Egypt’s security, as the country continues to face an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria affiliate in the

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35. CRS, *Egypt*, 14.

Sinai, instability and terrorist infiltration from neighboring Libya, and the need to protect its economic interests in the eastern Mediterranean region.

Keeping business-as-usual is not a good option either because it erodes the US image from a moral standpoint. To remain silent on the incarceration of thousands of political prisoners and not take meaningful action gives the impression Washington is uninterested in human rights, not just with Egypt but with other strategic partners globally. For the United States' own values, the current administration and Congress should confer and agree to a reduction in military aid to Egypt by a certain percentage (perhaps by a third), shift those resources to economic aid as administered by the US Agency for International Development, and keep the reductions in place until there is a significant improvement in human rights. This reduction and shift in resources will certainly upset the Egyptian political and military hierarchy, but it would conform to a values-based approach to US foreign and security policy without scuttling the entire relationship. In addition, it will signal to Egyptian nonviolent oppositionists who champion democracy that the United States still stands for human rights and cares about the plight of the Egyptian people despite its strategic ties to an authoritarian government. As imperfect as this policy recommendation is (human rights advocates will attack it as too soft while apologists for the Egyptian government will say it is too harsh), it would allow for a values-based approach in an imperfect world. Shifting the way the United States approaches aid to Egypt is not sufficient by itself; it requires a more active approach by the US military.

### Implications for the US Army

The US military has developed close relations with Egyptian counterparts since the late 1970s, and many Egyptian military officers have undergone training in the United States, including Sisi, where civilian control of the military and respect for human rights is taught.<sup>36</sup> Hence, US Army officers should not be swayed by their Egyptian counterparts who may have disregarded this training, believing that Egypt needs to keep tens of thousands of political prisoners locked up or that journalists who do not toe the government line should be arrested to preserve the country's stability. In the long term, such draconian policies are likely to cause more instability, as stifling dissent often breeds anger and upheaval.

The decision to reduce military aid to Egypt is the purview of the US civilian leadership, both in the executive and legislative branches of government, as mentioned above. While US Army officers are not such decisionmakers, they

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36. Eric Trager, "Portrait of the General as a Not-So-Young Grad Student," *Foreign Policy*, August 7, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/07/portrait-of-the-general-as-a-not-so-young-grad-student/>.

play a role when dealing with a strategically important but repressive country like Egypt. Before US Army officers are sent to Egypt (for participation in joint military exercises or as part of the Office of Military Cooperation in the US embassy, for example), they should undergo predeployment training in the United States on the types of situations and interactions they might encounter with Egyptian counterparts. They should be taught to not be taken in by arguments supporting the belief that the Egyptian government needs a heavy hand to keep the country safe and stable, that Westerners do not understand democracy is ill-suited for Egypt, and that Western standards of human rights should not apply. If Egyptian military officers raise the fact that some dual US-Egyptian citizens have been released from custody, US Army officers should acknowledge such releases respectfully, but then ask about the fate of the thousands of Egyptian nationals languishing in jail, not all of whom are terrorists, a term that is used very loosely by Cairo to label most oppositionists.

This is not to say US Army officers should get into arguments with their Egyptian counterparts. If they are confronted with such diatribes, they should diplomatically remind their counterparts that such attitudes run counter to Egypt being a signatory to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international norms. Additionally, they should remind these counterparts that the curriculum at US professional military education institutions, like the US Army War College, emphasizes the importance of respect for human rights for all US partner countries not just for Egypt. Critics of this approach may argue it is improper for Army officers to play a role that is traditionally the purview of professional diplomats, but since the military plays such a prominent role in Egyptian society (military personnel run many businesses and are the source of governorships of provinces), their officer corps is arguably the most important institutional player in the polity, one that would be more receptive to the views of fellow military officers than civilian diplomats.

In order for this strategy to work without causing severe rifts in the government, State Department officials should be part of the instructional, predeployment training. US Army officers assigned to Egypt should meet with officials at the State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. That way, the messages US Army officers will convey to their Egyptian counterparts will be in sync with State Department policy. The effort made by US Army officers to raise these issues in a respectful manner when in discussions will not magically turn around the human rights situation, but the discussions might contribute to a marginal improvement in rights and lessen repression down the road as these officers rise in rank and become key decisionmakers.

Another important role US Army officers can play in Egypt, and elsewhere, is to be the eyes on the ground. If they see human rights abuses, such as US-supplied military equipment being used against innocent civilians as opposed to genuine terrorists, they have a duty to notify their superiors in Washington. Such unvarnished reporting will give US national decisionmakers the data they need to make informed decisions about whether to maintain or cut off aid and by how much.

Although this article has dealt with an issue relevant to the National Command Authority and the decisions the Department of Defense must make on an important, bilateral security relationship, US Army officers can play an important role in supplementing traditional State Department reporting on human rights by witnessing, for example, Egyptian counterterrorism training and hearing from their Egyptian counterparts what took place in various security-related encounters.

### Conclusion

This article argues that, despite much conventional wisdom to the contrary, the United States has limited influence on human rights in a country like Egypt and that using military aid as a lever to improve the human rights situation usually does not work—or is only marginally effective. Egyptian officials will make decisions on the use of repression based on their calculations of the perceived domestic threats whether the United States likes it or not. That said, US officials should not simply give up on this issue, but should make decisions based on strategic and moral calculations. If repression continues, the United States should not remain silent and should pursue policies consistent with a values-based approach to foreign and national security policy. At the same time, the United States must balance this moral stance with its strategic interests. Hence, reducing military aid, but not cutting it off completely, and shifting US resources to economic aid may be the appropriate approach.

Because Egyptian military officers play an important role in Egyptian society it makes sense for US Army officers to serve as interlocutors on a host of issues outside the military sphere. This proposed new role, however, would take US military officers outside their comfort zones and require them to undergo significant political training in order to address human rights concerns. As long as their messages are in sync with State Department policy, their involvement should be welcomed by the US government. This enhanced US military role, while unlikely to change the human rights situation in the near term in any significant way, could pay future dividends.

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