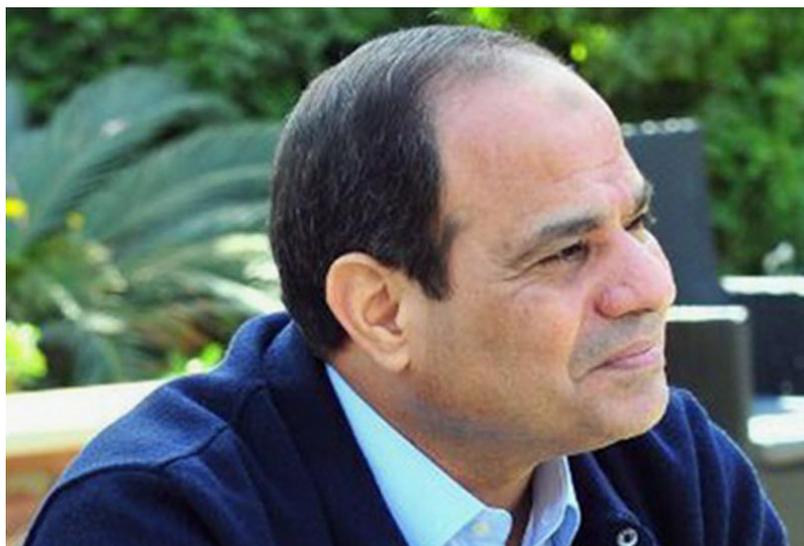


VIN WEBER
GREGORY B. CRAIG

COOPERATING **NOT** **CONDONING**

*Toward a More Constructive
U.S. Egypt Policy*



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CONTENTS

THE AUTHORS | IV

INTRODUCTION | v

1. THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT | 1

2. FROM MORSI TO SISI | 5

3. THE SISI GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE | 10

4. TOWARD A CONSTRUCTIVE U.S. EGYPT POLICY | 15

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The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
1111 19th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20036

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THE AUTHORS

VIN WEBER, cochairman of the government relations firm Mercury/Clark & Weinstock, served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1981 to 1993, representing Minnesota's second congressional district. He was a member of the Appropriations Committee and an elected member of the House Republican leadership. Mr. Weber is former chairman of the National Endowment for Democracy, where he still serves on the Board of Directors, a trustee of the Aspen Institute, and is on the Board of the Council of Foreign Relations. In addition, he has served on the Secretary of Defense's Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee and the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Democracy Promotion.

GREGORY B. CRAIG, a partner at the law firm Skadden Arps, has served in key policy positions for much of the past thirty years, including as President Obama's White House counsel, director of State Department policy planning in the Clinton administration, and senior advisor on defense, foreign policy, and national security issues to Senator Edward M. Kennedy. In 1998, he was named assistant to the president and special counsel in the White House, where he led the team assembled to defend President Clinton against impeachment. Mr. Craig has served as vice chair of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and chair of the International Human Rights Law Group.

INTRODUCTION

FOR MORE THAN A GENERATION, Egypt has been a linchpin of U.S. interests in the Middle East. But seismic changes in 2011 and 2012—from the Arab Spring revolution that led to the demise of Hosni Mubarak to the election of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi as the country's first civilian president—raised concerns about the direction of Egyptian politics and the stability of Washington's relations with Cairo.

So, in summer 2012, The Washington Institute invited two respected voices in foreign policy—Vin Weber, former Republican congressman from Minnesota and former chairman of the National Endowment for Democracy, and Gregory B. Craig, former White House counsel in the Obama administration and director of State Department policy planning in the Clinton administration—to constitute the Institute's Task Force on the Future of U.S.-Egypt Relations. Their charge was straightforward: to assess the emerging political situation in Egypt and offer recommendations to the U.S. administration on the best way to advance American interests in the current environment.

To learn firsthand about the situation in Egypt, the authors traveled to Cairo, where they met with a broad array of Egyptian politicians, party leaders, civil society activists, scholars, and journalists. Their interlocutors represented the breadth of Egyptian public opinion, from Salafists to Western-oriented businesspeople to non-Islamist revolutionary activists. In addition, because of the importance of the Egypt-Israel relationship to U.S.-Egypt ties, they traveled to Israel as well, where they met with senior political, diplomatic, and security officials.

In their November 2012 report, *Engagement without Illusions: Building an Interest-Based Relationship with the New Egypt*, Weber and Craig voiced skepticism regarding Egypt's trajectory under Morsi, which was neither pluralistic nor consistent with U.S. regional interests. The authors thus argued that Washington should present Egyptian leaders with "a set of clear choices that would give them a pathway to act as responsible national leaders rather than as religiously inspired ideologues."

The concerns expressed by the task force regarding Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were well founded. Around the time the Institute released the report, Morsi issued an edict granting himself total authority, triggering protests that escalated for months until the Egyptian military, led by then defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, ousted the president on July 3, 2013.

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Two years later, Sisi, who won a barely contested presidential election in May 2014, has led a severe crackdown on the Brotherhood and other opposition forces, dulling Egypt's democratic prospects almost entirely. But at the same time, Sisi has battled ISIS-affiliated jihadists in the Sinai, maintained strong relations with Israel, and undertaken critical economic reforms. Sisi's Egypt thus represents a significant policy dilemma for Washington: how can the United States cooperate with Cairo on shared strategic interests without condoning its autocratic trajectory?

To answer this question, The Washington Institute reconvened its Task Force on the Future of U.S.-Egypt Relations in spring 2015. Weber and Craig returned to the region, where they once again met with a broad array of figures in Egypt, and also held meetings with senior Jordanian and Israeli officials to assess the regional implications of recent events in Egypt and U.S. policy. This concise report represents their collective findings and recommendations. Weber and Craig have endorsed this statement solely in their individual capacities; their endorsements do not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions or firms with which they are currently affiliated.

The task force would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided by Washington Institute staff in organizing their meetings, arranging their travel, and preparing this publication. They are particularly grateful to David Schenker, the Institute's Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics, and Eric Trager, the Institute's Esther K. Wagner Fellow, who provided invaluable insight on contemporary Egypt throughout this project. While the Institute is proud to publish this report, it had no control over the task force's deliberations or this final product. The report has not been endorsed by the Institute, its Board of Trustees, or its Board of Advisors, and it should not be construed as representing their views.

Robert Satloff
Executive Director
November 2015

CHAPTER 1

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

FOR NEARLY FOUR DECADES, Washington's strategic relationship with Egypt has been a pillar of the U.S. security architecture in the Middle East. The relationship with Cairo is rooted in the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, and has flourished in the intervening years, fueled in part by nearly \$72 billion in U.S. economic and military assistance. This generous funding has reflected an abiding U.S. interest in Egypt's continued commitment to the peace treaty and ensured sustained U.S.-Egypt cooperation on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and regional diplomacy.

Beyond the peace treaty and security cooperation, Egypt is significant to Washington for two reasons. First, Egypt is the most populous Arab country and boasts the Arab world's strongest military, and is an important force in regional politics. While the political uncertainty that followed Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring uprising reduced Egypt's regional influence to some extent, other Sunni Arab states continue to view Egypt's strength and stability as vital to their own strategic depth, which is why Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait have committed more than \$20 billion in aid to Cairo during the past two years. Moreover, Egypt remains a pivotal diplomatic player: it hosts the Arab League, sponsors Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire negotiations, and will likely win a nonpermanent seat on the UN Security Council in October for the fifth time in the council's history. A good relationship between Washington and Cairo bolsters U.S. influence within the Arab world.

Second, Egypt is significant to U.S. strategy because of its geography. Situated at the crossroads of Africa and Asia, Egypt controls the Suez Canal and critical airspace. Thanks to the strength of the relationship, Egypt permits more than two thousand U.S. military aircraft to transit its airspace—often with little advance notice—and also affords approximately ninety U.S. warships per year priority access in the Suez Canal. The relationship is therefore vital to equipping U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf, reassuring U.S. allies against Iran's hegemonic ambitions, and supporting the current efforts against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State.

To be sure, the U.S.-Egypt relationship has not always been smooth sailing. While the strategic value of this relationship is widely appreciated within Washington, Egypt's autocratic politics has been a source of significant discomfort. Many U.S. policymakers and analysts view the Egyptian government's repressive-

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ness as a catalyst for instability, and worry that, if U.S. aid to Egypt's military isn't balanced with a push for human rights, the United States will be viewed as amoral and unprincipled, an outside player with no loyalties other than to those who are in power. They also worry about tarnishing America's image by aligning so strongly with a nondemocratic regime. Successive administrations have thus tried to encourage greater political openness—much to Cairo's chagrin.

The first major attempt in this regard occurred during President George W. Bush's administration, which successfully pressured Egypt to hold its first-ever multicandidate presidential elections in 2005. But the effort soured the bilateral relationship, and then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak refused to visit Washington for the remainder of Bush's tenure. Soon after taking office, President Barack Obama tried to turn over a new leaf with Egypt by delivering an address to the world's Muslims from Cairo in June 2009. The January 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak, however, forced the Obama administration to rethink its policy, and in May 2011 Obama announced a policy that emphasized democracy promotion. Yet the military junta that succeeded Mubarak aggressively rebuffed these efforts: in December 2011, security forces raided four American pro-democratic NGOs, accusing them of stoking chaos in Egypt. In June 2013, after a drawn-out trial, forty-three employees—including seventeen Americans—were convicted of sedition.

Meanwhile, Washington struggled to respond effectively to Egypt's messy and often violent political transition. The U.S. worked to "engage" the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly after Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi narrowly won Egypt's first fair and free elections in June 2012. Yet Morsi's inept and increasingly autocratic rule sparked broad resistance, as did his political alliance with more-radical Salafist groups. "The U.S. thought it could deal with the Brotherhood as if they were moderate Islamists," one Egyptian businessman told our group, reflecting a widespread sentiment among those who support the current regime. "They were wrong. They are not moderates. They are not democrats. They never cut their ties with the terrorists." Egyptians also "deeply resented the Brotherhood telling them what to do and how to be religious," an American journalist told us. The escalating anti-Brotherhood furor reached a boiling point on June 30, 2013, when unprecedented millions demonstrated for early presidential elections. Morsi and the Brotherhood, however, refused to compromise, and Egypt's military—headed by then defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi—responded by toppling him on July 3. While the Obama administration declined to call Morsi's ouster a "coup," which would have legally compelled the suspension of all U.S. assistance, it urged Egypt to return to a democratic path.

Instead, the past two years have been the most repressive in Egypt's contemporary history, as the regime, now headed by President Sisi, has cracked down on the Brotherhood and other opposition groups. Since Morsi's ouster, more than 1,800 Egyptians have been killed in political violence, tens of thousands have been imprisoned, and severe restrictions have been placed on protest and media rights. The Sisi regime, however, remains popular because many Egyptians view it as the country's last hope for stability. The burgeoning Islamist insurgency in Sinai, for example, spread westward to the Nile, killing more than 700 hundred security personnel and bolstering Sisi domestically.

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The regime's flagrant human rights abuses have complicated its relations with Washington. As the regime's crackdown became increasingly deadly in 2013, peaking with the killing of approximately 800 pro-Morsi demonstrators on August 14, the U.S. administration faced growing pressure from Congress and human rights organizations to respond. On October 9, the administration announced that it would withhold much of the \$1.3 billion in annual military aid to Egypt "pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections." This decision stalled the delivery of "large-scale military systems," including Apache helicopters, F-16s, tank kits, and Harpoon missiles. The policy shift was a lose-lose proposition: it had no impact on Egypt's political trajectory and at the same time strained Washington's strategic relationship with Cairo, which argued that it needed the military support to combat worsening jihadist threats to the west in Libya and to the east in Sinai. As a result, the Obama administration reversed this policy in March 2015, resuming military aid. At the same time, however, the administration announced that cash-flow financing of the military aid would end in 2018, which limits Egypt's ability to procure expensive weapons systems by using anticipated U.S. aid as credit.

While U.S. military and economic support has resumed, the relationship remains tense due to persistent disagreements over Egypt's repressive domestic politics. Meanwhile, Sisi's Egypt faces significant economic and security challenges that could undermine his presidency and threaten the state's broader stability. Four years of continuous revolution have taken a heavy toll on Egypt's economy, depressing GDP, deterring foreign direct investment, and increasing poverty. And demographic pressures are making matters worse. Already the most populous Arab state, Egypt is adding a million new citizens every 4.5 months—approximately one birth every twenty seconds—and is on pace to possibly double its population by 2050.

The security outlook is similarly bleak. In Sinai, Egypt is at war with an increasingly lethal insurgency now affiliated with ISIS that has spread west of the Suez Canal and attacked civilian targets in the Nile Valley. Egypt faces a comparable threat to the west, where state breakdown in Libya has provided fertile ground for jihadists, who have launched deadly attacks on Egyptian security personnel in the Western Desert. Amid these difficult conditions, Egypt has become dependent on the generosity of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. The nearly \$20 billion in cash and project-related support provided by these countries over the past two years equates to roughly a quarter of Egypt's annual budget.

Even with this enormous Gulf grant assistance, Egypt remains on the economic precipice. While Sisi has undertaken some subsidy reforms and achieved some initial successes, such as securing funding for massive-scale projects and increasing electricity-generation capacity, Egypt requires a nearly unachievable 13 percent growth to feed and employ its growing population—several times the 2.2 percent growth it has experienced in the past year.

Measured against the regional standard, Egypt is relatively quiet. From Yemen to Iraq to Syria, Sunni jihadists are battling Iran-backed Shiite militants, and multiple states have collapsed amid the bedlam. The recently inked nuclear deal with Iran is stirring anxiety among the region's Sunni Muslims that Tehran will be further emboldened to pursue subversive activities. Indeed, there is every reason to

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expect that the wars enveloping the region will continue for many years, displacing millions and redrawing borders—often to the benefit of terrorist organizations and rogue regimes. Egyptians feel these regional trends very acutely. As one Egyptian businessman told us:

I don't like [Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu] but he is right about Iran. Getting rid of Iran's nuclear weapons is not enough. The Iranians already have Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Iranians finance terrorist organizations all over the region.... Egypt is in danger.

Washington should pursue the strategic and political aspects of its relationship with Egypt in parallel.

Given this context, Egypt's steadiness should not be taken for granted. As one U.S. official confided, "Egypt is a very messed-up country. We have to help keep it afloat for our own interests." This means helping Egypt meet its security needs through continued military aid and address its economic challenges by encouraging investment and providing economic support. At the same time, Washington can—and should—continue to encourage political reform in Egypt, arguing that greater political openness and inclusiveness will promote longer-term stability.

In other words, Washington should pursue the strategic and political aspects of its relationship with Egypt in parallel. It should cooperate with its longtime ally on shared regional interests and help it contend with the many challenges it faces—and it can do this without in any way condoning Egypt's domestic political repression. Alternatively, if Washington merges these two aspects of the bilateral relationship, such as by conditioning the strategic relationship on Egyptian political reform, it will come away with neither. And given the crumbling state of the Arab world, Washington can ill-afford to sacrifice its partnership with Egypt.

CHAPTER 2

FROM MORSI TO SISI

MUCH CHANGED between our study group's visit to Egypt in September–October 2012, when the political situation was quite fluid, and our most recent visit in May–June of this year. Three months before the earlier visit, Morsi had narrowly won Egypt's first post-Mubarak presidential election, and then spent his first hundred days in office consolidating his political power. His most important move in this regard came on August 12, when he fired Egypt's top two military officials, named the barely known Sisi as defense minister, and seized total executive and legislative authority from the junta that had ruled Egypt since Mubarak's February 2011 ouster. Even as the military responded by stepping back from the political scene and promising to respect the elected authorities, we were skeptical that the power struggle between the military and the Brotherhood, which had until that point defined the post-Mubarak era, was entirely settled. As we wrote in our November 2012 report: "There can be no doubt that the military continues to retain considerable power and influence; few believe it has irrevocably surrendered its pivotal role in Egyptian politics. Still, the trigger for its return to active politics is unknown—perhaps even to the military itself."

The unsettled relationship between the Brotherhood and Egypt's other political forces added to the uncertainty, and our November 2012 report thus had more questions than answers about Egypt's political future. Would the Brotherhood embrace more hardline Islamist positions to protect its right flank from the Salafists, who appeared to be the Brotherhood's most significant competitor, or would the Brotherhood instead "be motivated more by the fear of economic collapse and . . . govern from the more pragmatic center?" Would the non-Islamists, who had performed better in recent elections yet remained divided among many ideological currents, "coalesce into a small number of coherent, cohesive political parties able to compete with the better organized, more ideologically disciplined Islamists?" And how would the Islamist government bridge its deep—and virtually irreconcilable—ideological differences with the non-Islamists? We suspected that these questions would be answered over the course of "several elections" and through the constitution-writing process. But we also noted that "the potential for mass politics (a return of Tahrir-magnitude protests) to overwhelm contested politics (representative government through a process of elections) is very real."

Ultimately, because of Morsi's increasingly autocratic rule and failed gov-

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ernance, the latter scenario played out. On November 22, 2012, Morsi issued a constitutional declaration that placed his own edicts above judicial scrutiny, effectively giving himself total power. The move was designed to protect the Islamist-dominated constitution-writing body from the threat of judicial dissolution—a reasonable concern, given that the judiciary had previously dissolved the Brotherhood-dominated parliament and an earlier constitution-writing assembly. But Morsi's power grab sparked immediate outrage, and Morsi exacerbated the crisis by calling a referendum on a hastily completed Islamist constitution. As demonstrations against Morsi escalated outside the presidential palace, the Brotherhood fueled the fire by allowing its youth cadres to attack the protestors, igniting clashes in which ten people were killed.

While the new Islamist constitution passed with 64 percent approval in late December 2012, the relatively low 33 percent turnout signified the political polarization that Morsi's power grab had catalyzed. Indeed, non-Islamists who stood alongside the Brotherhood in demanding Mubarak's ouster now regarded Morsi as a new dictator, and accused the Brotherhood of exploiting the 2011 uprising to advance its narrow agenda. Morsi's critics cited his behavior to support their accusations: more journalists were prosecuted for "insulting the president" during Morsi's year in office than during Mubarak's three-decade rule, and Morsi reneged on his promise to govern inclusively by using every round of appointments to stack his government with Muslim Brothers.

The political crisis coincided with an emerging economic crisis that Morsi failed to resolve. In March 2013, foreign cash reserves hit a record low of \$13.5 billion, threatening Cairo's ability to sustain its costly fuel and food subsidies, and a wave of electricity blackouts and gas shortages hit as Summer 2013 approached. Meanwhile, as popular sentiment turned strongly against Morsi and the Brotherhood, the police openly mutinied against the elected president, stirring a rise in crime and the proliferation of small arms.

As the situation deteriorated further, Morsi rejected calls for establishing a national unity government, and instead appealed to his narrowing Islamist base. In mid-June, he appointed a member of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah as governor of Luxor, and then held a rally alongside radical clerics at Cairo Stadium, where he endorsed jihad in Syria. Yet these moves backfired: they unnerved the military, which viewed Morsi's open embrace of extremists as a national security threat, and strengthened the popular opposition to his presidency. The crisis boiled over on June 30, 2013, when masses of Egyptians—in numbers seemingly surpassing the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak—took to the streets demanding early presidential elections. Pro-Sisi Egyptians often equate the street demonstrations against Morsi to a landslide general election against him and, as part of this narrative, inflate the number of protestors. As one businessman told us:

Thirty million Egyptians went into the streets to get rid of Morsi . . . out of anger. There was anger and consensus. I myself went into the streets wearing dark glasses and a hat. I found that I knew everyone in the street. I couldn't find a soul that I didn't know.

Once again, Morsi refused to compromise, and the Brotherhood mobilized its cadres to assemble in two Cairo squares to defend his presidency. With Egypt seemingly on the brink of collapse, and many fearing impending clashes between pro- and anti-Morsi demonstrators, Defense Minister Sisi announced Morsi's ouster on July 3, and outlined a transition plan that included a new constitution, parliamentary elections, and then presidential elections.

While many, and perhaps most, Egyptians hailed Morsi's ouster, the Muslim Brotherhood decried it as a coup and vowed to continue protesting until Morsi was restored to power. Morsi's removal plunged Egypt into a bitter political struggle between the new military-backed government and the Brotherhood, with each side viewing the other's destruction in life-and-death terms. In this vein, the new regime characterized the Brotherhood as "terrorists" who had tried to transform Egypt into an Islamic state, and presented Sisi as the "hero" who "saved Egypt." Indeed, as one senior Egyptian official told our study group:

We saved Egypt. Our country had been kidnapped. People did not look deep enough into the history of this country to understand the true identity of our country. Egypt needed someone to restore and preserve our identity as Egyptians. . . . Every Egyptian is proud of its army. There is a special relationship between the Egyptian people and their army. It is organic. Without the army, Egypt would be another Syria or Iraq.

By contrast, the Brotherhood cast the military leadership as "traitors" and characterized supporters of Morsi's ouster as opponents of Islam—secularists, Christians, and remnants of the Mubarak regime. Accordingly, the Brotherhood insisted that the coup was supported by only a small fraction of Egyptians and assured its followers that Morsi would soon return and that Sisi and his fellow "putschists" would be punished.

As a result of these diametrically opposed narratives, U.S. attempts to promote "reconciliation" went nowhere and ultimately alienated both sides: the Brotherhood viewed the initiative as validating a coup, while the regime interpreted it as reempowering a terrorist organization. After weeks of sporadic protests and violence during which dozens of Morsi supporters were killed, the regime launched an August 14 crackdown targeting the Brotherhood's two protest sites, resulting in the 800 deaths mentioned earlier. (This figure comes from Human Rights Watch, whereas official Egyptian estimates put the toll closer to 600.) During the same period, dozens of churches were burned across the country.

Two years later, the conflict between the Egyptian government and the Brotherhood has changed little. The Egyptian regime, headed by Sisi since his victory in the barely contested May 2014 presidential election, has continued its crackdown on the Brotherhood, imprisoning tens of thousands of its leaders and members, hundreds of whom were subsequently sentenced to death. The regime has also repressed non-Islamist oppositionists by enforcing stiff restrictions on protest rights. As one American journalist emphasized to our group, "Sisi has imprisoned every icon of the Egyptian Awakening—the secular democrats; the young people; the opposition parties; the journalists." Indeed, the regime has also dramatically curtailed media freedoms, notably by prohibiting journalists from entering Sinai to cover the conflict and by prosecuting three Al Jazeera journalists. (One of the

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Al Jazeera journalists was ultimately deported to Australia after spending 400 days in prison, and Sisi pardoned the other two in September.)

For its part, the Brotherhood now openly calls for Sisi's death and embraces attacks on infrastructure and security forces as acts of "resistance." In January, an official Brotherhood statement endorsed "jihad" against the Sisi regime. And the Sinai-based jihadist insurgency, which exploded following Morsi's ouster, has increasingly attacked targets west of the Suez Canal. In the past year, more than 200 terrorist attacks have been carried out, including the June 29 assassination in Cairo of Egypt's prosecutor-general.

Despite this unprecedented repression and violence, the political uncertainty that we observed during fall 2012 has largely dissipated. To be sure, Sisi, like his predecessor, is not fully in control; as one American observer noted, "It would be a serious mistake to think that Sisi is wholly in charge." He must contend with various other power centers, including the military, judiciary, police, and key segments of the business community, and is therefore far less powerful than his title suggests. Because they view the Brotherhood as an existential threat and share an interest with the regime in preventing its return, these institutions may sometimes compete with each other but are unlikely to break from the regime any time soon.

Moreover, another mass uprising appears highly unlikely in the near term. While Sisi's support is very difficult to gauge, oppositionists told us that they sensed minimal public support for another revolution. After four years of near-constant political tumult, many and perhaps most Egyptians prefer the status quo to further upheaval. They also fear that another revolution could mean the sort of chaos that has beset other Arab Spring states such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

Still, the political situation remains fragile. The October/November 2015 parliamentary elections have witnessed feeble turnout and seem likely to privilege the country's rural power centers, the clans of the Nile Delta and tribes of Upper Egypt that constituted Mubarak's base. Meanwhile the non-Islamist legal opposition parties are expected to perform poorly. Of course, this could enhance regime durability by integrating rural power centers into the ruling coalition. But given that millions of Egyptians rejected this type of parliament during the 2011 uprising, it is far from clear that they will accept it now. Still, as one opposition party leader told us, the new parliament could "give Sisi greater cover to make the tough decisions."

The future of political Islam is an even bigger question. The Sisi government and its supporters continue to view the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, making it highly unlikely that the Brotherhood will be permitted to participate in elections or government any time soon. But the Salafist al-Nour Party, which finished second to the Brotherhood during the parliamentary elections in 2011–2012 and won nearly a quarter of the seats, is still a legal party, which raises many questions about the future of Islamist political participation. For example, will Salafists, if not Islamists more broadly, now support the al-Nour Party as the only major Islamist game in town? Or has al-Nour hurt its legitimacy among Salafists and other Islamists by participating in the Sisi regime's elections, especially given that other Islamist parties will boycott them? And if the next parliament does not sufficiently include Islamists, will Islamists simply wait for the next

political opening? Or will they seek political power through other means, such as violence?

When asked about the current regime's autocratic backsliding, Egyptian officials typically highlight new constitutional limits on presidential power. As one military official told us:

It is a major achievement of the Sisi government to announce in advance that it would limit its own power to two terms. This is a major achievement. No Egyptian has ever done that before: not Farouk, not Nasser, not Sadat or Mubarak. For the first time in our history, there are time limitations on power.

Yet these political questions are far less pivotal today than they were three years ago, because for many and perhaps most Egyptians, economic and security considerations now trump political ones. While the country's tumultuous and ultimately failed experiment with democracy has bred acceptance of, if not support for, Sisi's autocratic rule, Egyptians are eager for solutions to the country's significant economic and security challenges. For this reason, the Sisi regime's durability ultimately depends on its performance: can it keep Egyptians safe and improve the country's economy despite a rising domestic insurgency and a collapsing regional order?

The Sisi regime's durability ultimately depends on its performance.

CHAPTER 3

THE SISI GOVERNMENT'S
PERFORMANCE

More than a year into Sisi's presidency...the specter of an economic crisis looms.

DURING HIS PRESIDENTIAL campaign, Sisi promised that Egypt's "problems will be over in two years." Although he has since adjusted this timeframe, that pledge reflected his regime's view that Egyptians wouldn't tolerate another failed government and raised the prospect of yet another popular revolt. As a result, Sisi focused on two areas during his first year in office: the economy and security.

More than a year into his presidency, however, progress remains slow. While Sisi has undertaken some bold economic reforms, the specter of an economic crisis looms. And the Egyptian military's operation against Sinai jihadists, which began in September 2013, has failed thus far: the jihadists have become more professionalized, sworn allegiance to ISIS, and repeatedly hit targets west of the Suez Canal.

ECONOMY

From 2005 to 2010, Egypt achieved an impressive average annual GDP growth rate of approximately 6 percent. But the benefits did not trickle down sufficiently to the lower and middle classes, and an estimated 40 percent of Egyptians subsisted on less than \$2 per day. Associated economic frustrations contributed to the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak, but economic conditions only worsened in the years to follow. Tourism, which previously accounted for nearly 10 percent of the economy, bottomed out; foreign direct investment (FDI) dried up owing to political instability and security concerns; and Egypt's cash reserves, as noted, hit a new low in March 2013 and only stabilized thanks to Qatari support. Then, as summer 2013 approached, the country faced debilitating energy and electricity shortages. These conditions contributed to the June 30 uprising that brought about Morsi's ouster.

When Sisi took office in June 2014, despite the more than \$20 billion in aid provided by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE, he inherited enormous economic challenges, including a food and fuel subsidy program that consumed one-third of the state's budget. A fixed payroll for the state's bloated public sector of 6.4 million employees ate up another quarter of the budget. Sisi also faced a significant natural gas shortage, resulting in electricity outages that forced factories to shut down and left millions of Egyptians in the dark for hours at a time. Finally, the Egyptian military controlled a significant portion of the economy, undercutting business

competition. Addressing each of these challenges carried substantial political risks: cutting subsidies or the state payroll exposed the regime to popular anger and possibly another uprising; addressing the gas shortage meant buying gas from Israel, which might similarly stir outrage; and privatizing the military's economic holdings could alienate the institution most responsible for Sisi's political emergence.

While the military's economic role remains the third rail of Egyptian politics, Sisi has otherwise taken steps to address many of these other economic challenges despite the risks involved. Within the first few weeks of his presidency, he cut fuel subsidies by 45 percent. He also expedited the rollout of a "smart card" system for tracking bread distribution so that government-subsidized flour would not be diverted to the black market, which has reduced consumption of government-supported bread by up to 35 percent. These policies slashed the subsidy budget in 2015/2016 by 10 percent from the previous year, and won high praise from the International Monetary Fund.

The devaluation of the Egyptian pound was another encouraging development, albeit one with risks. Historically, Egypt supported its currency to maintain its value, but this practice came at significant cost to the Central Bank and spooked potential investors. In July 2015, however, the Central Bank acted on the IMF's advice and allowed the currency to be devalued. At the same time, the government eliminated constraints on dollarized bank accounts. It is too soon to judge the impact of these moves: although intended to reassure investors, they will likely spur further inflation, squeezing millions of Egyptians subsisting along the poverty line.

Sisi has also made significant strides toward improving the consistency and capacity of Egypt's electricity grid. In the past year, Egypt filled a 3.5-gigawatt gap during peak hours by contracting with Siemens and General Electric to update existing facilities and provide two new mobile generators. Moreover, the Sisi government has signed contracts to bring an additional 30 gigawatts of electricity production online across the country. Meanwhile, Cairo has committed to changing its current energy mix, reducing its reliance on natural gas—which is increasingly in short supply in Egypt—and moving toward coal and renewables. (The recent discovery of a massive natural gas field off Egypt's Mediterranean coast, however, may alter these plans.)

At the same time, Sisi has focused on attracting FDI, which his government views as essential for employing Egypt's youth sector. He has tried to make Egypt more business-friendly through "one-stop shopping" legislation to streamline the incorporation process and limit opportunities for corruption. Cairo also reduced income tax by 25 percent and instituted a two-year hiatus on capital gains tax. Such efforts were bolstered by the March 2015 "Egypt the Future" international investment conference, during which \$30 billion in contracts were signed.

More controversial has been Sisi's emphasis on large-scale infrastructure projects to stimulate the economy. Over the past year, Egypt has built more than 3,000 kilometers of roads, initiated a project to construct a million housing units, and opened a new 37-kilometer waterway to increase the capacity of the Suez Canal. The roads and the installation of hundreds of new traffic signals have been visible—if limited—indicators of progress. But the UAE, which had committed to funding the housing units, pulled out of the project over corruption-related

Devaluation of the Egyptian pound was another encouraging development.

Perhaps the biggest long-term challenge facing the Egyptian economy is demography.

concerns, and the military has since taken it over, making its ultimate economic impact somewhat ambiguous.

It is similarly too soon to judge the impact of Sisi's biggest infrastructure project, the \$8 billion Suez Canal extension unveiled by his government in August. On the positive side, the project was funded in part by an oversubscribed bond sold to Egyptians. While many of these bond buyers were likely motivated by the 12 percent interest rate, the government has touted the rapid sale of the bond shares as evidence of a newfound "shared ownership and political will" for moving Egypt forward. But no feasibility studies were done prior to the building of the extension, and maritime shipping experts doubt it will boost Egypt's canal revenues significantly.

Perhaps the biggest long-term challenge facing the Egyptian economy, however, is demography. Today's population of 90 million, as intimated earlier, is expected to increase to 150–180 million by 2050. Given that Egypt is already the world's largest importer of wheat, this rapid population growth may challenge Cairo's ability to feed its public, even despite Sisi's reforms. Moreover, Egypt needs a GDP growth rate of about 7 percent to create the approximately 700,000 annual jobs just to maintain the 12 percent (official) unemployment rate. Yet optimistic appraisals have Egypt's GDP growth reaching just 4.5 percent in 2016.

The regional context is another cause for concern. Since Egypt's 2011 uprising, Cairo has depended on the generosity of the Gulf states, as previously discussed. While this assistance is expected to continue in the near term, low oil prices and donor fatigue may eventually limit the flow from this seemingly endless tap. Moreover, whereas the late Saudi king Abdullah viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat and eagerly supported Sisi's crackdown, Salman, the new Saudi king, appears more concerned with uniting Sunnis against Iran and less interested in seeing the Brotherhood crushed.

SECURITY

Egypt's security challenges, however, represent the country's greatest overall economic threat. As one Egyptian military official told us, "Our borders are threatened everywhere, and there is also danger inside the country—in a most ferocious way in the Sinai." Indeed, the jihadist insurgency in Sinai and rising incidence of terrorism west of the Suez Canal threaten to keep tourists and foreign investors away, and could jeopardize Suez Canal traffic as well. Yet, as noted, Sisi has accomplished very little on this front, and security has continued to deteriorate on his watch.

The situation in Sinai is particularly treacherous. While the jihadist insurgency in northern Sinai is largely confined to a 40-kilometer strip between al-Arish and Rafah, on the Gaza-Egypt border, insurgents have repeatedly hit targets west of the Suez Canal and gained supporters in the Nile Valley. In November 2014, the dominant jihadist group, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, declared allegiance to ISIS and renamed itself Wilayat Sinai, or Sinai Province, and its attacks on Egyptian security forces have since become more sophisticated and deadly.

The Egyptian military's failure to stem the Sinai insurgency can be attributed largely to its reliance on conventional warfare tactics against a stealthy opponent.

The use of heavy firepower to fight an enemy who hides among civilians has been ineffective and has also alienated the Sinai population. The military's insistence that all terrorist attacks are ultimately the work of the Muslim Brotherhood, when in fact the Brotherhood and Sinai Province are operationally and tactically distinct organizations, suggests that the military still isn't analyzing the Sinai situation realistically. Indeed, against all available data, the Egyptian military insists it is "winning" in Sinai, and refuses to update its tactics for fighting an insurgency. As a result, the Egyptian military appears to be merely trying to contain, rather than defeat, the jihadists. Yet the jihadists' continued ability to carry out attacks in Sinai and beyond, including an attack at a tourist site in Luxor and the recent assassination of Egypt's prosecutor-general, suggests that the insurgency isn't being contained at all. As one Israeli expert in the strategy of counterinsurgency observed, "[When it comes to a list of things] you just shouldn't do to counter an insurgency, Egypt has checked every box."

The Egyptian military's policy toward Rafah illustrates the consequences of its outdated approach. To prevent the jihadists from receiving arms from Gaza, Egypt has reportedly razed approximately 1,200 homes and displaced thousands of residents to create a one-kilometer buffer zone, but hasn't provided adequate compensation. This imprecise strategy against terrorists fuels further alienation within Sinai and could bolster support for the jihadists. More to the point, in the months since the military razed the Rafah homes, Sinai attacks have become more frequent and dozens of additional Egyptian security personnel have been killed.

The security deterioration has also affected the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), which currently comprises 1,667 personnel from twelve countries who monitor implementation of the security provisions in the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty. In recent months, Sinai Province has attacked an MFO air base and also attacked roads used by MFO personnel. As a result of these new dangers, the Obama administration has reportedly been considering drawing down the MFO contingent.

Tensions between Cairo and Washington have likewise been exacerbated by the security situation. Indeed, Egypt has repeatedly rejected U.S. offers for counterinsurgency training and adamantly refuses to reprogram U.S. military aid away from big-ticket items and toward counterinsurgency tools. Egypt has similarly refused to provide evidence that the Brotherhood and Sinai Province are coordinating with each other, despite its repeated requests for Washington to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. As one Egyptian military official told our study group:

The U.S. should understand that Egypt is at war with the Brotherhood. There is no such thing as a moderate Brother. It was shocking to see representatives of the Brotherhood meeting with members of Congress and visiting the State Department.

On Libya as well, Washington and Cairo have fundamentally different views on how to handle the situation. For more than a year, Egypt has confronted a worsening security crisis to its west, as Libya-based jihadists, some of whom affiliate with ISIS, have launched deadly attacks against Egyptian security personnel in the Western Desert and murdered Egyptian citizens in Libya. Egypt has responded by

"[When it comes to a list of things] you just shouldn't do to counter an insurgency, Egypt has checked every box."

Washington should not take Egypt's relative stability for granted.

launching airstrikes against the jihadists, at times in coordination with the UAE, according to reports. Although the Obama administration has expressed its sympathy for the security challenges Cairo now faces from Libya, it has argued that these airstrikes are not part of any clear strategy, and undermine existing efforts to broker a settlement among Libya's warring factions. Meanwhile, in September 2015, the Egyptian military mistook Mexican tourists in the Western Desert for terrorists, killing eight.

Beyond the Sinai- and Libya-based insurgencies, Egypt faces an upsurge in low-profile attacks by Muslim Brothers and other "anti-coup" forces. In recent months, these groups have repeatedly attacked security installations, electrical grids, and roads, aiming to degrade state infrastructure. While these attacks have ultimately bolstered support for the Sisi regime, they are nonetheless occurring more frequently. As in Sinai and Libya, the Sisi regime has no clear strategy for addressing this threat, and this will significantly hamper Egypt's ability to move forward economically, developmentally, and politically any time soon.

Despite this dire outlook, it is important to place Egypt's struggles in context. Unlike many of the other countries affected by the Arab Spring, Egypt still has a coherent state, as well as a coherent military that enjoys significant public support. And unlike every other country in the region that is at war with ISIS-affiliated jihadists or other insurgent groups, the Egyptian military has not ceded any ground and maintains complete territorial control. So while we left Cairo with great concerns about Egypt's ability to move forward under the present circumstances, we see a significant U.S. interest in helping Egypt succeed on every front. While the bar for success is much lower than in the past, it is nonetheless more important than ever that Washington help Egypt clear that bar. The consequences of collapse in Egypt would be grave, and Washington should not take Egypt's relative stability for granted.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARD A CONSTRUCTIVE
U.S. EGYPT POLICY

U.S. POLICYMAKERS and analysts tend to view Egypt as the ultimate test case for the classic tradeoff between American interests and values. After all, Egypt is at once a strategic ally at peace with Israel and at war with jihadists, and a deeply repressive country that is now cracking down on Islamist and non-Islamist oppositionists alike. But based on our conversations with a wide range of actors in Egypt and elsewhere, we believe that this interests-versus-values tradeoff is a false one. A constructive U.S. policy toward Egypt should pursue both in parallel—coordinating with Egypt on security matters and encouraging Egypt to improve its human rights record and allow greater political freedom—while understanding that these goals will likely be achieved at very different paces.

Indeed, the context in which the Sisi regime came to power and currently operates complicates short-term U.S. efforts to promote significant political reforms in Egypt. After four tumultuous years, there is a broad desire within Egypt for immediate security and economic improvements, but far less enthusiasm for rapid democratization. As many and perhaps most Egyptians see it, the country's first real experience with democracy didn't work: the country's first elected leader, Mohamed Morsi, was an utter failure, and they fear that another rushed democratization process could empower another batch of inexperienced leaders who will only exacerbate the country's economic and security problems. Egyptians also look at their region, with political upheaval giving way to violent unraveling in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and fear that another round of rapid political change might resign their country to the same fate. And the regime itself is particularly resistant to near-term political reform: it fears that any political opening might enable the Muslim Brotherhood to return to power and seek vengeance. Many Egyptians view foreign attempts to promote democracy as life-threatening. The fact that many Egyptians share the regime's narrative regarding the Brotherhood and heartily support its suppression further complicates U.S. efforts to encourage reform, and makes "reconciliation" between the current regime and the Brotherhood virtually impossible.

To the extent that the Egyptian culture ever experienced a moment conducive to coalition-building and compromise, that moment has passed at least for the time being.

U.S. policymakers tend to view Egypt as the ultimate test case for the classic tradeoff between American interests and values.

The emergence of ISIS makes stability in Egypt more important than ever.

The experience of the past three years also suggests that Washington has limited leverage for encouraging domestic political change within Egypt any time soon. As one U.S. journalist told us:

U.S. influence in Egypt is at a historical low and still going down. The U.S. appeared to be pro-Mubarak for too long—and should not have been. The U.S. appeared to be pro-Brotherhood—and should not have been. The U.S. appears to be anti-Sisi—and should not be. Whenever Egypt is under stress, rabid xenophobia surfaces. If the U.S. espouses an “open politics” for Egypt today, you are saying, “Death to Sisi.”

Consider that when the Obama administration withheld much of the \$1.3 billion in U.S. military aid in October 2013 “pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections,” it had no impact. As even the staunchest critics of the Sisi regime’s authoritarianism told us in Cairo, this policy of aid conditionality undermined Washington’s credibility as both a strategic partner and a democracy promoter. Since the aid was withheld at a moment of unprecedented domestic and regional turmoil, Egyptians broadly saw it as a hostile act—and not as a policy intended to promote human rights. Meanwhile, in lieu of critical U.S. military assistance, Cairo sought other partners, signing a \$5.5 billion deal to buy twenty-four fighter jets from France and negotiating another \$3.5 billion weapons deal with Russia. The administration ultimately recognized that withholding the aid was neither advancing democracy nor helping the strategic relationship, and thus restored the aid in March 2015.

A few important lessons can be taken from this episode. First, Cairo has other options aside from U.S. support—and it is willing to pursue them if U.S. support isn’t forthcoming. Second, if the United States hopes to convince Egypt to allow greater political openness and thus promote longer-term political stability, it must restore its credibility with Cairo by helping Egypt achieve its more immediate priorities: economic growth and security. As one secular opposition party leader told us:

Stop talking about [military aid]. Stop lecturing Sisi. Stop conditioning U.S. aid on a change of [domestic political] behavior. The weaponry at issue is not being used to repress people. Help Sisi fight terrorists. Support economic development.... Focus on economic assistance.

Given the current regional context, this policy prescription has merit. The collapse of the Middle East state system and emergence of ISIS make stability in Egypt more important than ever, and Washington should do what it can to help Cairo achieve economic growth and security.

Accordingly, the United States should take the following steps on the strategic front:

- ▶ Use the U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue, which convened in early August for the first time in six years, as a springboard for enhancing coordination on Libya and counterterrorism in Sinai.
- ▶ Resume Bright Star annual training exercises between Egyptian and U.S. forces in Egypt, focusing on modern counterinsurgency techniques.
- ▶ Coordinate with Egypt and Israel on MFO force protection, and affirm U.S. commitment to this vital component of the trilateral relationship.

- ▶ Improve U.S.-Egypt intelligence sharing to enhance counterterrorism and regional cooperation.
- ▶ Encourage Egypt to reprogram a portion of its military assistance away from legacy systems that are more suitable for conventional wars and toward equipment that is better suited for counterinsurgency, including Black Hawk helicopters and C4ISR systems, as well as tools for enhancing security along the Libyan border.

On the economic front, the United States should:

- ▶ Continue to support Egyptian efforts to attract foreign investment, and send economic and business delegations to advise the Egyptian government on its fiscal policies.
- ▶ Assist Egypt in improving its education system, such as by helping it establish more vocational and community colleges, and offering more fellowships for Egyptian educators to study in the United States.
- ▶ Encourage Sisi to continue his government’s economic reform agenda.

An important regional component must also be emphasized. During our trip, we heard repeated complaints that the United States is abandoning its traditional Sunni Arab allies in favor of realignment toward Iran; the Iran nuclear deal is only heightening such concerns. For these allies, Egypt has become a litmus test of Washington’s policy direction. Reinvigorating the U.S.-Egypt relationship is therefore vital to the Obama administration’s efforts to reassure its Sunni partners that the Iran deal does not mean that close U.S. ties with Sunni states will be neglected.

Focusing on Egypt’s economic and security needs, however, does not mean giving Cairo carte blanche on its repressive trajectory. Rather, the United States should use these efforts to encourage Egypt toward political reform and improving its human rights record. To be sure, progress will be incremental—but it is nonetheless possible, so long as engagement on these issues is persistent and quiet. Indeed, public denunciations of Egypt’s human rights abuses, though warranted, will not achieve results. The Egyptian government sees itself as threatened and responds to public criticism defensively, rather than constructively.

The release of U.S. citizen Mohamed Soltan earlier this year is a useful case study in this regard. Soltan served as spokesman for the Brotherhood-led protests against Morsi’s ouster in summer 2013, and was arrested in August of the same year while Egyptian security forces were searching for his father, a high-ranking Brotherhood leader. Soltan went on a hunger strike in prison, and was later given a life sentence. After months of quiet diplomatic engagement, including a direct request for Soltan’s release from President Obama during a call with Sisi, the Egyptian government agreed to deport Soltan on May 30, 2015, after he renounced his Egyptian citizenship. By this point, U.S. military aid to Egypt had been resumed and the overall strategic relationship was starting to get back on track. U.S. officials believe that the improved bilateral relationship helped move the human rights outlook one small step forward.

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Through a similar process of quiet but persistent engagement, Washington might make progress on the NGO trial, which remains a thorn in the U.S.-Egypt relationship. Our discussions in Egypt indicate that Sisi has considered a number of mechanisms for dismissing the felony convictions of the forty-three pro-democratic NGO employees, including the seventeen Americans, but that he faces various legal barriers and institutional risks, such as potential blowback from the judiciary. Despite holding exclusive executive and legislative power, Sisi is not omnipotent—the judiciary continues to act as an independent power center, and Morsi's attempts to curtail its power contributed to his ultimate demise. Still, the fact that Sisi is aware of this issue and weighing various remedies provides the United States with an opening to keep pushing. It is therefore important that every U.S. delegation raise this matter with Egyptian officials, as we did repeatedly during our trip.

To be sure, a gradual approach toward human rights in Egypt runs contrary to the mood in Washington. Many policymakers and analysts cheered Egypt's 2011 uprising as a pro-democratic turning point, and view Egypt's current trajectory as a fundamental betrayal of the Arab Spring. But as we heard during our trips in fall 2012 and May–June of this year, the Arab Spring was far less romantic for those who lived through it, and many Egyptians now view democracy as mutually exclusive with the stability they crave. We do not share this view, of course: we believe that long-term stability in Egypt and economic growth require greater political inclusiveness. We fear that the current regime's broad crackdown on its opponents may have a radicalizing effect and could well fuel greater violence in the streets. But convincing Egyptians of this means reestablishing U.S. credibility as a partner and creating a security and economic context that makes Cairo more willing to take the risks that political reform entails.

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“Washington should pursue the strategic and political aspects of its relationship with Egypt in parallel. It should cooperate with its longtime ally on shared regional interests and help it contend with the many challenges it faces—and it can do this without in any way condoning Egypt’s domestic political repression. Alternatively, if Washington merges these two aspects of the bilateral relationship, such as by conditioning the strategic relationship on Egyptian political reform, it will come away with neither. And given the crumbling state of the Arab world, Washington can ill-afford to sacrifice its partnership with Egypt.”

