

# U.S. Military Aid to Egypt: Assessment and Recommendations

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## Brief Analysis

**T**his is the second in a two-part series on the topic "U.S. Aid to Egypt: Building a Partnership for the 21st Century." [Read Part I. \(templateC05.php?CID=1202\)](templateC05.php?CID=1202)

The question of U.S. military aid to Egypt poses an unusual policy dilemma: should it go up or down? On one hand, Egypt's strategic location, its strict implementation of the military aspects of the peace treaty with Israel, and its strong record of operational support for U.S. initiatives make a strong case for an increase in U.S. military assistance. On the other side, Egypt's "cold peace" and competitive approach toward Israel, its coziness with rogue regimes in Libya and Sudan, its public criticism of U.S. initiatives in the Gulf and the peace process, and its lack of significant external threats all convincingly argue for a cut. Indeed, both proposals have been made by influential congressional voices. In the end, an assessment of the costs and benefits of America's \$1.3 billion in military aid suggests that maintaining the program at current levels -- no increase, no decrease -- is the approach that best advances U.S. interests.

**Egypt-U.S. Strategic Relations** At first, U.S. military assistance to Egypt was a reward for making peace with Israel and so was tied to U.S. aid levels to Israel. But over time, the U.S.-Egypt strategic partnership assumed importance of its own. The result is that today, the U.S. relationship with Egypt, and particularly with Egypt's military, is a critical asset to U.S. interests. The U.S. military presence in the Gulf and the region at large is dependent on a logistical pipeline that runs through Egypt. No matter how vocally Cairo may oppose U.S. diplomatic tactics or military planning -- as it has repeatedly done vis-à-vis Iraq and the peace process -- it has never failed to grant the U.S. overflight rights, basing, or transit through the Suez Canal. During Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, U.S. aircraft flew 200,000 sorties across Egypt to the Gulf, and during the October 1997 crisis with Iraq, Egypt granted passage through the canal for the USS George Washington in an unprecedented 12 hours. Sustaining American

military operations in the Gulf without Egyptian cooperation would be difficult, if not impossible. The political and strategic reality is that decreases in U.S. assistance are sure to affect Egypt's willingness to cooperate so speedily and effectively. Furthermore, U.S. military aid enhances Egypt's ability to operate jointly with U.S. forces.

Moreover, it is important to recall that Egypt has, in the past, committed troops on several occasions to support U.S. policy initiatives. Cairo sent forces to prop up the Mobutu regime in Zaire in 1977, to Morocco in the war against radical Algeria in 1979, to oppose Libyan operations in Sudan in 1983, to defend Saudi Arabia in 1990, to police Somalia in 1992, and to pacify Bosnia in 1994. In many of these interventions, Egyptian forces provided the critical element of Arab or Islamic partnership with the United States and the West.

The Army and Regime Stability Domestically, the Egyptian armed forces remain the pillar of the Mubarak regime and a pivotal force for stability in the Arab world's most populous and influential country. Egypt's army is a bulwark against the Islamists and, perhaps surprisingly, one of the most influential constituencies supporting peace with Israel and a pro-American approach to foreign policy. Indeed, to the extent that Cairo has struck an independent course on issues such as the peace process, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan in the last few years -- which has justly earned Washington's ire -- there is strong evidence that the U.S.-Egyptian military relationship has been active in moderating these Egyptian policies. In short, the strength of the Egyptian military and its ties to the United States are the best guarantor of Egypt's stability and pro-Western stance.

The Dark Cloud of Cold Peace Discussion of military aid to Egypt cannot be divorced from the Israel connection and an assessment of the dangers of "cold peace." The principal reason for concern over Egyptian rearmament is the sense that many, if not most, Egyptians have still not reconciled themselves to Israel's right to statehood but only tolerate the peace treaty because of the latter's military strength; change the balance and peace would dissolve. Anxieties are fed by threatening noises sometimes heard from Egyptian politicians or generals about political initiatives to change that balance (e.g., targeting Israel's nuclear program) as well as by military actions, like the provocative 1996 military maneuver Operation Badr that al-Ahram described as a message to Israel that "the end of war does not necessarily mean the achievement of peace, and vice-versa."

The fear that the U.S.-funded modernization of Egypt's armed forces may create a threat to the security of Israel is a vital concern. To be sure, the possibility that advanced U.S. weaponry (and the acquisition of European arms with cash freed up by the provision of U.S. aid) might embolden Cairo in an Arab-Israeli confrontation cannot be ignored. However, a number of safeguards remain firmly in place:

- The two U.S. battalions stationed in the Sinai as part of the Multilateral Force and Observers (MFO) set up to support the Egypt-Israel peace treaty play a critical role. This highlights the continuing importance of that peacekeeping force.
- The heavy dependence of the Egyptian military upon U.S. logistical support is insurance against an Egyptian return to confrontation with Israel. Institute fellow Kenneth Pollack has found compelling evidence that, in 1995, Cairo wanted to conduct a squadron-sized air-strike against Khartoum to retaliate for Sudan's complicity in the assassination attempt against Egyptian President Mubarak earlier that year. However, when Washington forbade U.S. military personnel from assisting with the operation, Cairo was forced to call off the attack because the Egyptians could not themselves handle its logistical requirements.
- Most indicators suggest that the Egyptian army would likely fare worse against Israel today than it did in October 1973. As Egypt's mediocre performance in the Gulf War demonstrated, Egypt's military capabilities have progressed only modestly over the last 25 years and, despite the efforts of thousands of U.S. advisers and billions of new weapons, almost certainly have not kept pace with improvements in Israeli capabilities.

- It is also worth recalling that in 1973 -- when Egypt's forces were at their logistical peak -- Cairo required an immediate, constant and massive resupply from the Soviets to sustain its war against Israel. Today, such resupply would be even more essential because Cairo has allowed its stockpiles of munitions and spare parts to dwindle, but Egypt knows that it would never receive U.S. support in a battle with Israel.

None of this solves the political problem about Egypt's evident preference for an almost zero-sum approach to peace with Israel -- a situation that obtained under both Labor and Likud prime ministers -- but there is no reasonable prospect of a move from cold peace (or even cold war) to something hot.

Recommendations Against this background, any increase in military aid would send the wrong political and strategic message. At the same time, a decrease in military aid to Egypt, concurrent with plans for a sizable (i.e., one-third) boost in military aid to Israel, is likely to inject political strain into the U.S.-Egypt military relationship and unnecessarily complicate the strategic relationship between Washington and Cairo. Staying the course on military aid, therefore, is the appropriate policy.

But that alone will not solve the problem of a deepening freeze in the Egypt-Israel military relationship. While this is just one aspect of the "cold peace," it is one with potentially strategic consequences. As a result, it deserves higher priority on Washington's crowded Middle East agenda. Reversing the downward trend in Israel-Egypt relations, especially through military-to-military ties, is an important U.S. interest. The new U.S.-Egypt "strategic dialogue," expected to be inaugurated in Washington this week, may provide a useful vehicle to address this problem, but its solution can clearly only be found through America's continued deep engagement with the Egyptian military.

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