

Cairo's Concerns About a Biden Presidency

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Brief Analysis

Egyptian leaders fear that his administration will openly confront them on human rights and enable an Islamist resurgence, but the outlook is brighter for engagement on Turkey, Israel, and other issues.

Over the past four years, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and other Egyptian elites have welcomed a status quo in which the White House focuses on combating extremism and advancing regional security cooperation without publicly challenging them on human rights and democratization. The prospect that Joe Biden's incoming administration may reconfigure these policy priorities is making Cairo anxious about the future tone and content of the bilateral relationship.

EGYPT'S CAUSES FOR CONCERN

This July, a shockwave swept across the Egyptian establishment when then-candidate Biden tweeted "No more blank checks for Trump's 'favorite dictator'"—a reference to the treatment of political prisoners under Sisi. Cairo's threat perceptions regarding a Democratic presidency only worsened in October, when a translated version of former secretary of state Hillary Clinton's declassified emails revealed the extent of the Obama administration's relations with Muslim Brotherhood officials during and following the group's brief reign under President Mohamed Morsi.

Such concerns help explain Egypt's mixed reactions to the election's outcome. When Biden delivered his victory speech on November 7, Sisi's spokesman posted a congratulatory statement on Facebook, making Egypt the first Arab state to do so. Likewise, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry emphasized his country's keenness to continue partnering with Washington on combating regional instability. Yet Sisi himself has not tweeted directly about Biden's win, and mainstream media circles—which often serve as his government's unofficial mouthpiece—seem panicky about the return of "painful memories" stemming from Obama's policies toward Cairo after the 2013 coup against Morsi. Such anxiety likely stems from four main factors:

Fear of political Islam. The elite circles that surround Sisi seem firmly convinced that Biden will echo Obama's approach, which they saw as embracing a role for Islamists in Egypt's internal politics. Furthering this perception is the fact that key Muslim Brotherhood figures and media personnel based in Turkey and Qatar have cheered Biden's victory—a response that goes beyond anything Egyptian Islamists have done for past American presidents. Other voices have counterbalanced this panic, however. Former foreign minister Amr Mousa argued that today's situation is different from seven years ago because Sisi has greatly cemented his grip on power, meaning the threat of the opposition returning in force is no longer feasible.

Lack of human rights and political openness. Cairo understands that its track record on these issues has been deficient over the past few years. Even the Trump administration's pleas failed to prevent the death of an American citizen in an Egyptian jail, so officials in Cairo see little chance of convincing Biden to avoid confronting them publicly on such matters. The government's worst nightmare is that Washington might pressure it to loosen repressive measures against jailed Brotherhood members and liberal political activists. That could cause major embarrassment for Sisi among his core constituents, many of whom have already been

losing faith in his government for other reasons (e.g., its inability to substantially improve their socioeconomic conditions).

A desire to diversify Egypt's foreign policy. In Sisi's view, the biggest mistake Cairo made during the Hosni Mubarak era was throwing all of its eggs in one basket, namely, the United States. Mubarak himself famously declared that "the one covered by the Americans is naked," and Sisi's circle shares this belief in the perils of overreliance on Washington. Accordingly, they have sought to harness the rising power of Russia and China. In their view, the Chinese will overtake America economically in the near term, and Moscow's increased military footprint in the Middle East is a welcome development, particularly in Syria and Libya. They also seem jealous that Gulf states have been able to acquire more-advanced weapons from Washington—in response, Egypt has been buying weapons systems from France, Germany, and Russia at a rate that seems out of line with its military needs and national budget.

Tensions with Ethiopia. In Egypt's view, President Trump has been actively and personally involved in [smoothing disputes over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam \(GERD\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-renaissance-dam-negotiations-an-egyptian-view\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-renaissance-dam-negotiations-an-egyptian-view), directing Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin to mediate between the two sides. Cairo fears that Biden will be less sympathetic to its views on the matter, and that he may reverse the current freeze on portions of U.S. aid to Ethiopia.

SHARED INTERESTS ON OTHER ISSUES

These concerns should not overshadow the potential for Egyptian interests to intersect with some of Biden's policies, especially regarding Turkey and Israel. Since late last year, Sisi has been at odds with Ankara in the volatile maritime boundary dispute over natural gas exploration in the East Mediterranean. In partnership with Greece, Cairo is now urging the Biden team to take a role in this dispute. More generally, Egyptian leaders would be delighted to see Washington adopt a tougher stance against Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whom they consider the number-one defender of political Islamists in the region given his willingness to host them and grant them citizenship.

As for Israel, Egyptian officials will continue to view good working relations with Jerusalem as a gateway to Washington policy circles—access that may help them mitigate some of their potential troubles in Congress over human rights and other issues. Given Israel's [recent normalization deals \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/uae-israel-peace-is-revealing-the-middle-east-faultlines\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/uae-israel-peace-is-revealing-the-middle-east-faultlines) with other Arab countries, however, Cairo will be hard-pressed to justify its longstanding practice of [restricting the relationship's public aspects \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/normalization-is-making-cairo-uncomfortable\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/normalization-is-making-cairo-uncomfortable) to a "cold peace."

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Egyptian leaders understand that beginning in January, there will be no room for the sort of personal relationship that Sisi has held with Trump over the past four years. This depersonalization of U.S. policy will probably make Cairo revert to advancing its interests via deeper reliance on military ties, taking advantage of its good relations with the Pentagon and Israel. Even so, Sisi is unlikely to differ from other Egyptian presidents in striving for broader American support, regardless of whether it comes from a Democratic leader who opposed his 2013 coup. In Sisi's view, getting Biden to work with him in the coming years would grant his rule bipartisan legitimacy from America's two main political parties.

For its part, Biden's administration would benefit from sticking to modest goals when dealing with Egypt, such as securing the release of all American prisoners and jumpstarting the economic reforms needed to avert a societal catastrophe for the country's 100 million citizens. Sisi is almost certain to reject calls for deeper changes, from easing repressive measures that keep the Muslim Brotherhood from reentering the political sphere, to reducing the military's influence in politics and the economy. To be sure, Egypt is unlikely to be an early priority for Biden. Yet once his administration does turn its attention to Cairo, having concrete, achievable goals will serve it much better than insisting on big-picture changes that are doomed to fall short in the near term.

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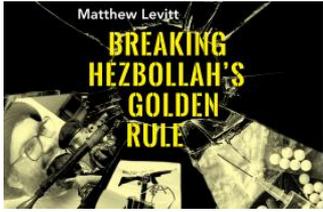
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