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How Can Washington Constructively Engage Cairo on Human Rights?

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Brief Analysis

If Washington hopes to encourage a change in human rights issues in Egypt, it should prioritize constructive engagement with Egypt and refrain from numerous critical public statements, unless it is willing to back them with action.

On March 12, the United States was among thirty-one countries to sign a joint statement criticizing Egypt on human rights abuses during the 46th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, which called on Cairo to lift curbs on freedoms of expression and assembly. The events of the session were particularly hard for Egypt since it was discussed under item four of the Council's agenda, placing the discussion of Egyptian human rights alongside discussions of human rights issues in North Korea and Venezuela.

In response, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry characterized the contents of the UNHRC joint statement as claims not based on accurate information. Government and private media outlets also circulated a report from a pro-government think tank—the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS)—arguing that the joint statement is part of a massive campaign against Egypt internationally, which only serves the Islamist agenda. The report also claimed that since President Sisi's assumption of power in 2014, the country has seen improvements in human rights via higher quality prisons equipped with modern medical equipment. It likewise denied the existence of detention camps, torture, or forced disappearances. This is the standard party response to international calls to change its policies, suggesting that Egypt is unlikely respond as hoped to public condemnations anytime soon.

Cairo Fears another Obama Presidency

Over the past two decades, human rights issues in Egypt have been a major irritant in U.S.-Egypt relations. Former President George Bush clashed with former President Mubarak on human rights issue to the point that the former Egyptian president canceled a visit to the White House. Likewise, under the SCAF—the military transitional government that governed the country in the wake of the 2011 revolution—the Egyptian government and the Obama administration clashed over the suppression of non-governmental organizations and the detention of political activists.

And while relations under the Trump presidency were comparatively warm, the new U.S. administration's signing of the joint statement comes at a time when Cairo is growing increasingly wary of its future relations with the United States due to the new Biden presidency. Additional critical statements on human rights issues from Congress, the State Department, and international organizations are causing Egyptian policy circles to fear an Egyptian-U.S. rift similar to the rift that occurred during the Obama presidency in 2011 and 2013. Prior to the statement, the pro-regime Egyptian journalist Ahmed al-Tahari, editor-in-chief of Rose Elyoussef magazine, had concluded during an interview with state-run television that Biden's policies would likely be a continuation of the Obama era based on Biden's Foreign Affairs article, "Why America Must Lead Again."

These fears are compounded by the fact that President Joe Biden has yet to speak with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, despite having been one of the first Arab leaders to congratulate Biden on winning the elections last November. This is an embarrassment for the regime and has become a jubilant talking point among Islamist and non-Islamist dissidents abroad. Lastly, the Biden administration's reversal of Trump's policy to limit U.S. aid to Ethiopia in light of the ongoing stagnation over Grand Renaissance Dam negotiations—especially without Addis Ababa having provided any concessions in the interim—is particularly troubling for Egypt, where the question of the dam filling is one of major concern for a country dependent on the Nile for almost all of its water consumption.

Overall, the Egyptian regime views critical U.S. and European statements as emboldening the opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Pro-government television stations and newspapers have constantly highlighted this narrative, purporting that it demonstrates an "international conspiracy" against the Egyptian state. For instance, anchor Ahmed Mouse has recently lashed out at some MB activists by name due to their relations with several members of the Democratic Party. In the same vein, the popular, pro-security apparatus news site al-Youm al-Sanaa has referred to Congressman Tom Malinowski as "the invisible arm of the MB" inside the Hill. Given this framing, Cairo sees the release of prisoners as inviting pressure domestically because such a policy will be perceived as caving to outside pressure that will only invite more pressure.

Examining Human Rights Issues with Fresh Eyes

Going forward, the Biden administration should be cautious not to build its policies toward Cairo by listening exclusively to Egyptian opposition voices. Egypt's exiled opposition is a fragmented and varied group. At least some opposition figures are not aligned with U.S. values, including those who refuse to condemn terrorism in Sinai or denounce the U.S.-designated terrorist group Hamas. For instance, Mekameleen TV, a Muslim Brotherhood opposition station based in Ankara, has argued in recent years that terror attacks in Sinai are fabricated by the Sisi regime. Mekameleen TV has likewise provided a platform for individual such as Yahya Alsayed Ibrahim Mohamed, a designated terrorist according to the U.S Department of the Treasury's January report.

Moreover, many opposition members hold the mistaken belief that the United States will force Sisi to release all prisoners from jail and even perhaps force a regime change to restore the clock back to 2013. On March 1, ahead of Biden's plans for a global democracy summit, some 41 Egyptian opposition figures called on the United States to

take action against the Egyptian regime, including the 2013 military coup among the crimes listed as being perpetrated by the regime. The Biden administration should be careful to delineate which of these policy goals it expressly supports and is willing to act upon.

Hence, it would be wise for the Biden team to keep in mind that siding completely with the opposition against the regime will naturally strain its relationship and potential leverage with President Sisi and, more importantly, tarnish the United States' image among a significant chunk of the Egyptian public. It is important to realize that, within Egypt itself, President Sisi still has significant popular support, especially when compared to the opposition.

If the United States hopes to further its goal of prisoner release, it should prioritize its diplomatic goals—focusing on the release of U.S. citizens, non-Islamist prisoners, and non-violent Islamists. Indeed, an U.S. acknowledgment that Egypt continues to face a terrorism problem will likely better serve the United States in its efforts to negotiate with the Egyptians over public condemnations.

A first step should include establishing a U.S.-Egyptian human rights dialogue involving the Egyptian security apparatus, the Judiciary, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a presidential envoy from President Sisi's office. Including the security and judiciary establishments is vital, as they are responsible for arrests and issuing travel bans. This type of dialogue will benefit both sides, since it will be a proper avenue to exchange respective views. The involvement of a presidential envoy would ensure that the two sides do not become bogged down in bureaucratic games and maximize the seriousness of the dialogue. For such a dialogue to work, the Biden team should avoid public conclusions and allow for this team to try to make progress for a few months.

Meanwhile, the administration should refrain from inviting Islamists and opposition members who oppose U.S. interests and reject the peace treaty with Israel to meet any major figures from the administration and gain public support. The opposition will use any public meetings in its propaganda war against the Sisi regime—the United States should refrain from allowing itself to be dragged into this political issue.

Just as the Biden administration is prioritizing measured diplomacy with Iran, Washington will benefit from taking its time to formulate its policies toward Egypt. U.S. foreign policy makers should make sure not to tie their hands with punitive measures early on—such a move could mean quickly running out of options with Cairo. Policies such as conditioning annual military aid, rushing towards sanctions, or forceful public statements should only be used as a last resort, deployed after engaging in a dialogue on human rights and evaluating the results with Egypt first. Proceeding in this manner will provide two benefits to the United States: it will allow the administration to take a stand for public U.S. values, but also give a U.S. ally a chance to correct its path and for President Sisi to demonstrate his keenness in developing close relations with the United States. ❖



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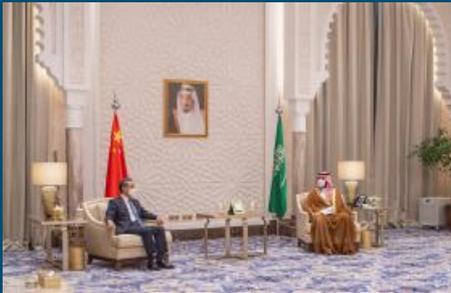
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