Understanding the Egyptian Military's Perspective on the Su-35 Deal

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Brief Analysis

If the United States will not provide Egypt with greater air to air capabilities, Egypt will risk sanctions in order to acquire them.

In October 2013, the State Department announced the halt of several pending arms transfers to Egypt, including 10 AH-64 Apache helicopters, four F-16C Block 52 fighter jets, M1A1 tank components, and Harpoon anti-ship missiles. The decision was intended to signal U.S. displeasure at human rights violations as a result of Egypt's military crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Though some equipment was delivered during this period, such as several of the AH-64 Apache helicopters in 2014, it was not until 2015 that the United States resumed the normal transfer of military hardware to Egypt.

However, in response to the pause, the Egyptian military undertook drastic measures to counterbalance their country's dependency on U.S. military hardware. Towards the end of that year, Egypt began negotiating the purchase of Russia's MiG-29M2 fighter jets, Ka-52 helicopters and Antey-2500 anti-ballistic missile systems. By 2015, Egypt concluded a deal with France to procure Rafale fighter jets and a FREMM frigate. The last straw for U.S. officials, however, was Egypt's $2 billion purchase of the Russian Su-35 fighter jet in October 2018.

One month after news of the sale broke in March 2019, then-U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo red-flagged the deal and warned at a congressional hearing of the need to imposing sanctions under the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanction Act* (CAATSA). In response, several members of the Egyptian parliament, including ex-military commanders, warned that these sanctions would be considered unacceptable interference in Egypt's sovereign decision to procure arms. The deal was justified as a part of the country's efforts to diversify weapons suppliers. Yet for the Egyptian military, the Su-35 deal represents more than an effort to diversify—it sees the deal as

a chance to negate the effects of repeated U.S. rejections of its attempts to purchase Tier 1 U.S. military hardware.

The acquisition of any military hardware is a process guided primarily by a rationale that links a country's perception of its military needs to means that can effectively and efficiently address those needs. This, however, does not mean that other considerations can be totally ignored or brushed aside. For example, Egypt's F-16 fleet—the backbone of the country's air force—is perhaps the most ineffective F-16 force worldwide. Despite upgrading the fleet to Block 40 and 52 standards, the United States has long denied Egypt air-to-air missiles with a range greater than 85 km, restricting Egypt's long/medium air-to-air missile arsenal to the AIM-7 Sparrow and 35 km shorter ranged AIM-9 Sidewinders.

For the Egyptian military, this is a major stumbling block. The Sparrow is a Cold War relic that requires the operator to remain locked-on to the target to score a hit, denying the pilot freedom of action or maneuver after launch. On the other hand, numerous other U.S. clients in the region—including Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, Oman, and Turkey—operate the superior active radar AIM-120 AMRAAM. This system's fire-and-forget capability allows the operator to maneuver freely after launch and possesses a publicized range that exceeds that of the AIM-7 Sparrow by an additional 20 km. The air-to-air missile restrictions have put Egypt's entire F-16 fleet at an overwhelming disadvantage should it engage in aerial combat with any air force in the region armed with beyond-visual-range (BVR) missiles. This significant tactical disadvantage likewise reinforces Egypt's principal weakness in past wars: its ineffective air power.

Furthermore, the United States has long denied Egypt advanced heavy air superiority fighters, which has restricted the range and capability of the Egyptian Air Force. Egypt has repeatedly sought to compensate for these disadvantages since the mid-1970s by pushing for an F-15 fighter deal, but while the United States has approved sale of these systems to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, all of Egypt's requests have been rejected. For Egypt, this is a particular sore point given that neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar has officially recognized Israel's right to exist. In 2018, Donald Trump made a verbal commitment to sell Egypt 20 F-35 fighter jets, but once again, a deal never materialized due to the opposition of the Defense Department and rumored Israeli pressures. These ongoing concerns encouraged Egypt to seek advanced fighters from other suppliers even if it risks CAATSA sanctions.

Nor have these restrictions been limited to U.S. hardware. When Egypt requested the French Rafale, the United States and Israel applied pressure on France to downgrade the air-to-air missile available to Egypt to the 80 km MICA missile instead of the 100 km Meteor missile.

While Turkey has also recently pursued a Russian arms deal, triggering CAATSA sanctions, the Egyptian case differs significantly. In the case of Turkey and the S-400, Turkey did have access to tier 1 American military hardware—including the F-35 fighter program, the THAAD missile defense system, and MIM-104 Patriot missile. As such, its decision to procure alternative Russian systems did not arise due to a perceived dire tactical military need, but rather from a clear political motivation. In contrast, Egypt sees its Su-35 purchase as necessary after decades of requests and rejections for U.S. tier 1 hardware.

Many will ask why Egypt feels this need for advanced air superiority systems and BVR missiles given that it is at peace with Israel, and its main threat is the Islamic insurgents in the Sinai and across the long Libyan borders. The Egyptian military, however, is focused on at least with two strategic threats that have created an urgent concern for boosting Egyptian aerial capabilities.

The first of these threats is the discovery of a gigantic gas field in the Egyptian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the eastern Mediterranean. To effectively secure its EEZ, Egypt would need an effective aerial fleet with a fuel capacity larger than its short-legged F-16 fighters to support its operating naval units in the region. The second is the threat to Egypt's south posed by the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Negotiations over the dam's operation and regulation

have not resulted in any legally binding agreement between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Should Egypt resort to a military option, the Air Force feels the pressure to operate an aerial fleet with a BVR capability to counter the Ethiopian Su-27 Flanker air superiority fleet, which is armed with R-27 air-to-air missiles whose range exceeds that of the Egyptian AIM-7 Sparrow, Aim-9 Sidewinder and the French MICA.

For these reasons, Egypt views the Su-35 deal as a bitter pill that it has opted to swallow to remedy its aerial inferiority. Even so, Cairo recognizes that it will face several challenges when it comes to integrating the Su-35 into its air force fleet. After all, it is not possible for the U.S.-made aircraft that constitute the backbone of the Egyptian Air Force and Egypt's U.S.-made early warning systems—namely the E2 Hawkeye AEW aircraft and C-130-Hs equipped with roll-on/roll-off electronic support measures equipment—to exchange data and communication with Russian-made systems. These challenges will make Egypt's Su-35 and MIG-29M2 fleet an air force within an air force, one that will operate almost autonomously and fly blindly.

Egypt attempted to tackle this challenge by launching an indigenous Radar Integration and Surveillance Command Center (RISC2), which allows aircraft of mixed origins to exchange data via a unified platform. Yet the operational status of this system remains questionable, and its combat effectiveness has yet to be tested. Proceeding with the Su-35 deal in spite of these challenges demonstrates that the concerns over air inferiority in Egypt are such that it is willing to not only risk sanctions but also risk operating a hybrid fleet in order to acquire an aircraft that can extend its aerial combat radius and deliver a large payload over longer ranges.

However, the weight of these concerns also suggests that the United States could encourage Egypt to reconsider the Su-35 deal if it is willing to offer suitable alternatives that meet the Egyptian Air Force's requirements—without compromising Israel's qualitative military edge. The Egyptian military would likely find acceptable an alternative outside of the advanced F-35 places recently procured by Israel. Instead, the Egyptian military would likely see as sufficient older but efficient systems and ammunitions such as those sold to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, including the AIM-120 AMRAAM BVR and F-15 heavy weight air superiority fighter.

In contrast, the threat of imposing sanctions on Egypt over the deal could drastically impact U.S. relations with the Egyptian military, including the reorientation of the Egyptian military leadership to eastern military educational institutions after decades of investing in a U.S.-educated Egyptian officer corps. Furthermore, linking matters of political differences such as the human rights record, democracy, and good governance to cooperation with the Egyptian military institution has not changed Egyptian policy and has only increased tensions.

When it comes to managing military relations with Egypt, a limited, pragmatic approach is more likely to enable the United States to advance its interests in Cairo in an era of renewed Great Power competition. Nasser's shift to the Soviet Union for arms sale in 1954 through the Czechoslovak Arms Deal proved decades later to be a contributing factor to an unstable Middle East, remedied only in 1979 and sustained by Egypt's procurement of U.S. military hardware. Egypt is still eager for increased military cooperation with the United States, but its leadership will still prioritize increasing its capabilities if additional U.S. arms are not on offer, including through additional arms deal with Russia or China. Just as in the Cold War period, a pivot of the Egyptian military could further destabilize the Middle East in the long-run.

For the moment, Egypt still sees itself as an indispensable strategic ally for the United States in the Middle East; it shares the U.S. goals of peace and stability in the Middle East and North Africa. U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation goes beyond the transaction of military hardware purchases, as Egypt grants the United States a preferential logistical access through its airspace and the Suez Canal, which is necessary to sustain the U.S. presence in the Gulf. Likewise, Egypt is among the very few effective military powers in the Middle East with a capability to effectively counter the increasing Iranian regional influence that has extended to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen. As such, understanding the Egyptian military perspective remains important; the Egyptian military sees stronger

systems and ammunition for Egypt as necessary to effectively operate in harmony with the United States and with other U.S. allies in the region, and to preserve peace and stability in the Middle East. ❖

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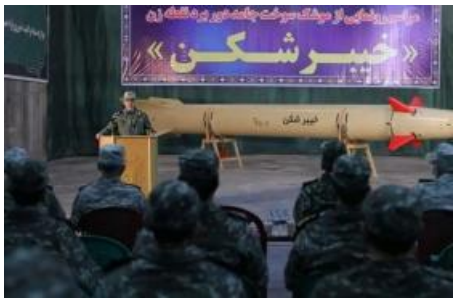

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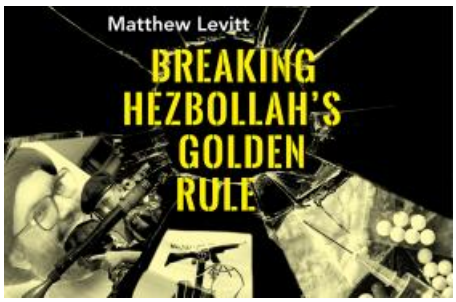

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