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Top Agenda Items for the U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue

by [David Schenker](#)

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Brief Analysis

In addition to continuing the discussion of withheld U.S. funding, Secretary Blinken's team should focus on steering Cairo toward productive steps in Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, Lebanon, and Syria.

When Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Shoukry visits Washington for the latest bilateral Strategic Dialogue sessions on November 8-9, Secretary of State Antony Blinken will have an opportunity to raise several pressing issues with him in person. In its early days, the Biden administration appeared to give Cairo the cold shoulder. Although Blinken called Shoukry within a month of his confirmation, President Biden did not speak with President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi until five months after taking office—a long time considering that President Obama called Cairo on day one of his first term. This May, however, Egypt played a crucial role in negotiating the Gaza ceasefire, and the frequency of senior-level U.S. engagements subsequently increased. In September, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Sisi in Cairo following the announcement that the United States had withheld \$130 million in military assistance.

To be sure, Egypt's key national security portfolios are managed not by Shoukry, but by General Intelligence chief Abbas Kamel and Armed Forces chief of staff Lt. Gen. Osama Askar. Yet Blinken's team can still hold productive talks with him on the future of U.S. assistance and Egypt's policy toward various regional hotspots.

U.S. Assistance

At the top of the list is the disposition of U.S. military assistance. All told, Washington provides \$1.3 billion in

annual Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Egypt, \$300 million of which is subject to certain congressional conditions. On September 13, the Biden administration indicated it would withhold \$130 million of the conditioned \$300 million based on human rights concerns (the remaining \$170 million was left available for counterterrorism-related purchases). Reportedly, the withheld funds will not be released until Egypt demonstrates progress on several human rights issues, such as dropping charges against [sixteen unnamed individuals](#) whose situation has become a topic of heated discussion in various media accounts and congressional hearings.

Cairo took a step in the right direction soon after Washington announced the funding freeze, dismissing charges against four NGOs that had faced various government restrictions since 2011 for accepting foreign funding. Meanwhile, Cairo rolled out a 700-page “National Strategy for Human Rights,” which ostensibly promoted a new approach on this front. And in late October, Sisi lifted the state of emergency that had been in place since 2017.

Just days later, however, hopes for substantial reform were dashed when the government announced changes that gave Sisi and the military essentially the same set of draconian national security powers. Hence, while the Strategic Dialogue will provide useful opportunities to discuss these issues, the prospect of lifting the administration’s hold on funding is not a realistic “deliverable” from these meetings.

De-escalating in Ethiopia

In recent years, Cairo and Addis Ababa have been at loggerheads regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The rate at which the GERD’s reservoir is filled affects the flow of the Nile, which Egypt relies on for nearly 90 percent of its water. Yet Ethiopia is currently preoccupied with a civil war, and the conflict risks becoming another irritant for Cairo.

Recent reports indicate that Egypt’s regional rival Turkey—which supports the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that [Sisi considers an existential threat](#)—has signed a deal to provide Ethiopia with Bayraktar TB2 drones, presumably for use against the government’s main opponent in the war, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front. Cairo is concerned about the sale, likely for multiple reasons. According to Egyptian media accounts, the deal could affect Sisi’s preliminary efforts to improve relations with Ankara, so Cairo wants input into whether the transfer should proceed at all. Egyptian officials may also hope to disrupt any measures that might strengthen embattled Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed. Whether for these reasons or a more general animus toward any Turkish inroads in Ethiopia, Cairo has apparently asked Washington to help scuttle the drone deal, though it is unclear if the Biden administration is willing or even able to intervene on the matter.

Reversing the Sudan Coup

Egypt’s role in the October 25 [military coup in Sudan](#) is unclear. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, top Sudanese general Abdel Fattah al-Burhan met with visiting U.S. special envoy Jeffrey Feltman two days earlier and assured him he had no intention of removing the democratically elected government—but then flew to Cairo right afterward to seek Egyptian support for doing just that. According to the *Journal*, General Intelligence chief Kamel had previously visited Khartoum and told Burhan that Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok “has to go.”

In any case, Egypt has yet to condemn the Burhan-led coup. The State Department has so far enlisted regional partners Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to help restore civilian rule (though the UAE’s own role in encouraging the coup remains unclear). Given Burhan’s allegedly close relations with Cairo and his past studies at Egyptian military college, Sisi’s government could play a useful role in this process if it were so inclined. Accordingly, Blinken should express Washington’s expectation that Egypt join the Arab “anti-coup” camp.

Playing a Productive Role in Libya

While the United States has supported the UN-led process in Libya and the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, Egypt took the opposite course and backed Gen. Khalifa Haftar’s so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) during the 2019-2020 civil war—a partnership that firmly aligned it with Russia. Indeed, Egypt reportedly went so far as to provide basing and logistical support for [Russia’s Wagner mercenaries](#) when they deployed next door. More recently, as Libya moved toward a tentative ceasefire and interim unity government, Egypt seemingly moderated its inclination toward Haftar. This shift coincided with incremental rapprochement between Cairo and Ankara, which had partnered with the GNA during the war.

With Libya’s national elections slated for December 24, it is increasingly important that Egypt play a productive role, particularly in supporting the [integrity of the electoral process](#). Russia and its mercenaries will no doubt try to subvert the process in the coming weeks by supporting their local allies, who will in turn protect Moscow’s equities if elected. Yet Egypt should resist the urge to back its own favorites, including Haftar, his Tobruk-based ally Aguila Saleh, or Muammar Qadhafi’s son Saif al-Islam. Cairo and Tripoli have signed a raft of trade and reconstruction deals in recent months, and Egypt eagerly anticipates the return of conditions that prevailed before 2011, when nearly 1 million of its citizens worked in Libya. Yet that will require greater stability next door. If Libyans do not believe their elections are credible, or if the losers do not respect the results, violence could break out again. The Biden administration should therefore use its upcoming meetings to articulate how Egypt’s conduct and sway over candidates in Libya can affect stability.

Staying the Course on Lebanon and Syria

The recent crisis in Gulf relations with Lebanon has threatened Egypt’s plans to export natural gas to that country via Jordan and Syria. (Technically, the arrangement would involve Jordan sending imported Israeli gas to Lebanon). Eager to punish Beirut for empowering the Iranian-backed militia Hezbollah, leaders in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain may try to pressure Cairo to shelf the export idea. Whatever the wisdom of the Gulf breach with Lebanon, Egypt should resist any such pressure and continue its export preparations. Even in the best-case scenario, reestablishing and testing the relevant pipelines will take months, if not years. Abandoning the gas project now would have no practical effect; Egypt can still do so later if warranted.

By discussing Lebanon with Shoukry’s team, U.S. officials could also create a useful opening for an exchange about Syria. Egypt is an enthusiastic advocate for returning Syria to “the Arab fold,” which would include unfreezing its Arab League membership and reintegrating it in the region politically and economically. The Biden administration is not actively opposing this reintegration, but it should at minimum coordinate with Egypt and other Arab partners to ensure that some concessions are extracted from the Assad regime in exchange—from achievable objectives such as protecting civilians, to more ambitious goals such as limiting Iranian ballistic missile bases on Syrian soil.

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