

Women, Minorities, and Military Aid to Egypt

by [Amy Austin Holmes \(/experts/amy-austin-holmes\)](/experts/amy-austin-holmes)

Aug 9, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alnsa-walaqlyat-walmsadat-alskryt-lmsr\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alnsa-walaqlyat-walmsadat-alskryt-lmsr)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Amy Austin Holmes \(/experts/amy-austin-holmes\)](/experts/amy-austin-holmes)

Amy Austin Holmes is an associate professor at the American University in Cairo.



Brief Analysis

As the next deadline for FMF disbursement approaches, the administration should remember that U.S. law requires it to consider Cairo’s recent track record on human rights.

Last August, former secretary of state Rex Tillerson withheld \$195 million in Foreign Military Financing from Egypt—or 15 percent of the country’s \$1.3 billion in total U.S. military aid—citing concerns over its political and human rights trajectory. The Senate has quietly moved to increase conditionality on such aid for similar reasons. Recently, however, Secretary Mike Pompeo released Tillerson’s withheld FMF without explanation. And by September 30, he will have to decide whether to release another \$195 million from fiscal year 2017.

By law, decisions about military aid should be informed by criteria laid out in 7041(a)(2)(A) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act. The first criterion, which focuses on “democracy and human rights,” specifically mentions protecting “the rights of religious minorities and women.” Egypt has clearly backslid on governing democratically, but how has it fared regarding women and minorities?

TARGETING SEXUAL HARASSERS...AND ACTIVISTS

President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi’s tone on women’s rights has improved since the time he defended the practice of subjecting female detainees to “virginity tests.” That incident made headlines after demonstrators were arrested for staging a small rally on International Women’s Day in March 2011, when Egypt was ruled by the transitional Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The female detainees were forced to have their hymens inspected by a uniformed military doctor. A council member at the time, Sisi claimed that the measure was necessary to safeguard the honor of military officers and deflect potential rape accusations, apparently reasoning that non-virgins could not be raped.

By contrast, President Sisi has periodically claimed to care about women’s rights, even declaring 2017 the “Year of the Egyptian Woman” and appointing the country’s first female governor, Nadia Abdo, in Beheira province. Yet how genuine is this change of heart in policy terms?

The government has taken some positive steps. In December 2017, the parliament imposed higher penalties for sexual harassment, stipulating fines of up to 10,000 Egyptian pounds. According to a 2013 study by the organization UN Women, 99.3 percent of Egyptian women reported being sexually harassed in the streets; similarly, a 2017 report by the Thomson Reuters Foundation labeled Cairo the most dangerous megacity for women.

Even as the legislature targets sexual harassers, however, authorities have simultaneously stepped up their political harassment of women's rights advocates. Two of the most outspoken advocates—Azza Soliman of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and Mozn Hassan of the group Nazra for Feminist Studies—have been barred from traveling abroad since 2016, and their assets have been frozen in an attempt to starve their NGOs of needed funding. The government's general hostility toward NGOs is well known, but even organizations that work in line with Cairo's self-professed objectives—such as preventing sexual harassment—are being persecuted under the 2017 NGO law.

Moreover, two women were imprisoned this May merely for complaining about the fact that they were sexually harassed. After Egyptian citizen Amal Fathy was harassed multiple times on the same day, including by a security officer inside a bank, she posted a video on Facebook saying how fed up she was. She was arrested on May 11 and is still imprisoned on serious charges, namely, publishing a video calling for the regime's fall, spreading false news that harms national security, and misusing the Internet.

Even more alarming is the case of Lebanese tourist Mona al-Mazbouh. Like Fathy, she posted a video complaint on Facebook after being harassed multiple times while visiting Egypt. She was arrested at Cairo airport as she attempted to leave the country and has since been sentenced to eight years in prison—a strange and sobering decision at a time when Egyptians are attempting to attract international tourists. Although the case raises many uncertain speculations about the government's actual views on sexual harassment, the message to women is crystal clear: if you are sexually harassed, remain silent or risk a long prison sentence.

INADEQUATE PROTECTION FOR CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

Egypt is home to the largest Christian community in the Middle East, and many hoped that their situation would improve after Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were removed from politics. President Sisi has taken some symbolic steps to show sympathy with Christians, for instance attending mass with Pope Tawadros II on the eve of the Coptic Christmas. Beyond this, however, they have even fewer actual gains to point to than women, and discrimination remains systemic (e.g., Christians are effectively excluded from high-ranking government positions).

Security has deteriorated for them as well. In 2017, for example, IS conducted four major terrorist attacks on Christian places of worship in Cairo, Alexandria, Tanta, and Minya. It is unclear what steps the government has taken to protect mainland churches from such violence. Some of the above incidents involved large bombs planted inside the targeted buildings, which presumably would have been impracticable if guards were present.

Meanwhile, the government has used a church construction law to shut down some places of worship. From September 2016 to April 2018, fourteen churches were forced to close, even though the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights documented that they were being used on a regular basis.

NUBIAN CRACKDOWN

When Egypt enacted a new constitution in 2014, it granted a number of historic concessions to the Nubian minority. Indigenous to Egypt and Sudan, Nubians are descendants of an ancient African civilization. Like women and Christians, they had reason for optimism that the post-Morsi government would be kinder to them. With Fatma Emam and Haggag Oddoul representing them in the drafting committee, they were able to secure the first-ever mention of Nubians in an Egyptian constitution. Article 236 gave them the right to return to some of the land

from which they were displaced by dam construction along the Nile, and the government finally appeared willing to rectify some of their longstanding grievances.

After making these concessions, however, Cairo engaged in an **unprecedented crackdown** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/19/what-egypts-racist-campaign-against-nubians-reveals-about-sissis-regime>). Sisi issued Presidential Decree 444 to establish a new military zone along the Sudan border, seizing many additional Nubian areas. The zone's massive size—125 kilometers in length—led to speculation that it was less a security measure than a land grab. By September 2017, the government was using tanks to disperse peaceful Nubian demonstrations on the land issue, arresting multiple protestors, one of whom died in prison. Authorities have also prevented the celebration of International Nubian Day for the past two years, despite it being a cultural event rather than an occasion for protests.

POLICY OPTIONS

With Egypt's population pushing 100 million, the government's human rights record is too important to simply ignore. Washington should therefore take the following steps, most of which center on the perfectly reasonable expectation that Cairo abide by its own laws:

- *Women.* U.S. officials should ask Egypt to enforce its penalties against sexual harassment and stop jailing women for merely complaining about the crime. Fathy and Mazbough should be released from prison immediately. Soliman, Hassan, and other civil society leaders should be allowed to travel, receive financial support, and operate their NGOs as part of their advocacy work for women's rights.
- *Christians.* Egypt argues that it still needs \$1.3 billion in U.S. military aid because of recent IS attacks. In return, Washington should ask Cairo to demonstrate that it is protecting those most threatened by such attacks: Christians. This means safeguarding churches and monasteries, not shutting them down.
- *Nubians.* Washington should demonstrate its concern for all of Egypt's minorities, not just Christians. Last year, Pope Francis visited the country as a gesture of solidarity with Copts, but no high-ranking official has made a similar show of support for the Nubian minority. A visit by members of Congress, or perhaps Barack Obama, would show that America's concern for human rights is universal, regardless of faith or ethnicity. In addition, the administration should quietly urge Cairo to limit the size and duration of its Sudan border military zone and allow Nubians to return to some of the land from which they were displaced, as stipulated in Article 236 of Egypt's constitution.
- *Military aid.* Secretary Pompeo should consider withholding the \$195 million in FMF until Cairo takes clear steps to protect minorities and women. If he does so, the potential security impact would likely be minimal in the short term given that the money represents only a fraction of Egypt's overall U.S. military assistance.
- *Appoint an ambassador.* The American embassy in Cairo has not had an ambassador since July 2017. Ideally, the State Department should appoint one who does not believe in choosing between human rights and security. Egyptians deserve both.

Amy Austin Holmes is an associate professor at the American University in Cairo, a fellow in the Wilson Center's Middle East Program, and a visiting scholar at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

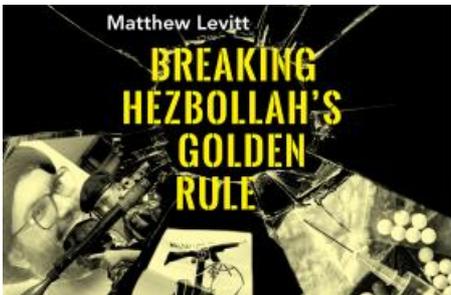
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)