

What Would Happen If Russia Flipped Egypt?

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Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.

An expert on Russian foreign policy explains how even a partial Cairo-Moscow alliance on specific security and energy issues could be inimical to U.S. interests.

Despite the constant media scrutiny of President Trump's foreign policy, experts say that the U.S. relationship with Egypt has been overlooked. This is particularly concerning given the strengthening ties between Cairo and Moscow. Anna Borshchevskaya, the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute, talks with Madeleine Kearns of *National Review* about the dangers posed by an Egypt-Russia alliance.

Kearns: In 2013, the Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted by a military coup. In response, the Obama administration treated his replacement, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, harshly. Has the Obama administration's flirtation with the Muslim Brotherhood weakened the U.S.-Egyptian relationship? If so, how?

Borshchevskaya: Yes, it has. Egypt grew increasingly mistrustful of the U.S. because of this flirtation. Perhaps more important, though, Washington delayed weapons deliveries to Egypt; it withheld military aid and later halted the nascent bilateral strategic dialogue. These steps suggested to Cairo that the U.S. was disengaging, it wasn't paying attention to its needs, and the relationship began to deteriorate.

Kearns: By contrast, and as his critics have noted, President Trump has a warmer approach to el-Sisi. So far he has invited him to the White House and engaged him with personal phone calls. Does this signify a change in policy?

Borshchevskaya: It's unclear, in part because we often see contradictions between what Trump does and what his administration does. We often see Trump behaving in one way toward Putin, for example, and his administration in another. It is Trump, for instance, who personally keeps inviting Putin to a summit, and he congratulated him on the election even as it was written to him in all caps, "DO NOT CONGRATULATE." Another example is in Afghanistan. Trump initially wanted to essentially outsource Afghanistan to private contractors, but in the end the policy that

came out did no such thing and frankly was better than his predecessor's. It certainly appeared to take past mistakes into account, one of which was announcing a specific date for a military withdrawal. This of course is a more positive example. My basic point is that it's hard to tell where things will end up, and I do sense that policymakers aren't taking seriously the possibility that Russia could flip Egypt.

Kearns: Why do you think the U.S. isn't yet taking Russia's interest in Egypt seriously? And what would your advice be to the Trump administration going forward?

Borshchevskaya: It seems the U.S. isn't taking seriously the growing relationship between Cairo and Moscow. Analysts and policymakers often tend to dismiss Cairo's flirtation with Moscow as mere posturing, an attempt to get a better deal from the U.S. but nothing more. This would be a mistake. Egypt, by expert accounts, truly is interested in diversifying away from the U.S.; it's not just mere posturing. And given the history of Moscow's ties with Egypt, it's not surprising that Cairo is turning to Moscow again. Moscow provides a lot that Washington can't: It doesn't precondition aid to improvement in human rights, it doesn't prohibit secondary arms sales, and so forth. Egyptians also feel comfortable operating Russian weaponry and helicopters, and first-hand pilot accounts suggest that they are well-suited for their needs. Thus, Russia provides something that is truly useful to Egypt, which is fighting an ISIS-affiliated insurgency in the Sinai. I also would like to add that we often hear correctly that Russia cannot replace the U.S.—whether when it comes to Egypt or other countries in the region—and it sounds reassuring. The problem is this: Russia doesn't have to replace the U.S. to damage U.S. interests. Frankly, Putin understands he can't replace the U.S., and he has no such aims.

My advice would be to take the possibility of Russia's flipping Egypt seriously, not to dismiss what's happening as mere posturing. Egypt is the cornerstone of American regional security in the Middle East, and if it turns to Putin we would lose one of our key regional allies. That Putin is building Egypt's nuclear-power plant, when Egypt used to be our partner on energy cooperation, shows that when we ignore Egypt's needs—both when it comes to security and energy—they find other, less palatable partners.

Kearns: Given the recent criticisms of Egypt's human-rights record, especially in the run-up to March's election, how should the U.S. engage President el-Sisi on these issues?

Borshchevskaya: The Obama administration ultimately couldn't negotiate a release of Aya Hijazi. Perhaps having close cooperation on security and other issues could give us better leverage to engage Egypt on human-rights issues. Our values remain important. We shouldn't abandon them. An Egypt that is in the Putin camp will only drive Egypt further away from these values.

[This interview was originally published on the National Review website.](https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/06/russia-egypt-relationship-foreign-policy/)

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