

Security Challenges in Egypt Two Years After Morsi

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Articles & Testimony

While the Sisi government's increasingly repressive trajectory remains a concern, the ongoing deterioration of Egypt's internal security is the more immediate threat, and U.S. policy should be adjusted accordingly.

Below are the closing recommendations from Mr. Schenker's prepared testimony. For his full remarks, download the PDF or watch video of the hearing (<https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-egypt-two-years-after-morsi-part-ii>).

No doubt, Egypt is situated in a difficult neighborhood. To the west is the failed state of Libya; to the south is a failing state in Sudan; and to the east, Egypt is contending with a burgeoning insurgency in the Sinai and a Hamas (Muslim Brotherhood) controlled Gaza. Yet in many ways, Egypt does not appear to be taking even the most obvious steps necessary to better secure the state. Consider that although Egypt complains incessantly about weapons flowing in from Libya, it has not prioritized funding border-security measures on that frontier.

Egypt's domestic counterterrorism capabilities are likewise lacking. The GID emerged from the 2011 revolution in a weakened state, and still hasn't apparently fully recovered. If the accidental killing of eight Mexican tourists in the Western Desert in September 2015 is any indication, intelligence gathering and communications between the military and other domestic security agencies is also a real problem. Clearly, intelligence gathering remains a serious deficit in the Sinai as well, even though cooperation with the Israelis is reportedly helping fill some gaps.

The security challenges faced by Egypt are enormous, and at present Cairo is not up to the task. Given the regional deterioration, the continued stability and security of Egypt should be a priority for the United States. There is much that Washington, working with Cairo, can do to help mitigate the threats. These steps might include:

Counterterrorism training. With Israel's permission, Egypt has deployed thousands of troops, along with dozens of

armored vehicles, tanks, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft, into the Sinai to fight the insurgency. But Egypt's heavy-handed and purely military approach has not succeeded, and is unlikely to succeed. It's not a problem of manpower -- it's a problem of tactics. For more than a decade, the United States has been conducting counterinsurgency operations against Islamist militants, and has learned valuable lessons in the process that Egypt, a major non-NATO ally, should benefit from. Cairo has historically been resistant to accepting advice. Washington has to make Egypt an offer of COIN training -- in Egypt, the United States, or a third location -- it can't refuse, creatively incentivizing the instruction and adoption of a new approach to counterinsurgency operations.

Developing the Sinai. Egypt's Sinai counterinsurgency approach is one-dimensional, but successful COIN campaigns have both civilian and military aspects. Problems in the Sinai didn't start with the Islamic State; the region has long been underserved, peripheralized, and unhappy with Cairo. The arrival of al-Qaeda and IS, and the breakdown of traditional tribal bonds, has only exacerbated the foment, and the collateral civilian damage meted out by the army is seemingly making matters worse. Absent economic and educational opportunities, the Sinai will continue to prove fertile ground for jihadist recruitment. In tandem with battling the insurgency, Washington should join with Cairo and other regional partners to invest in the Sinai, beyond the hotels of Sharm al-Sheikh.

Leveraging the Gulf. Washington has had little success in incentivizing improvements in Egyptian governance or modifications in military tactics by conditioning assistance dollars. It's possible that U.S. allies in the Gulf -- Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait -- which are currently underwriting Egypt's budget, would have more luck pressing Cairo to prioritize Sinai economic development and adopt modern COIN techniques. The U.S. administration should be engaging with its Arab Gulf allies to help convince Egypt of the wisdom of these two initiatives.

Increasing visibility. Egypt has been loath to allow journalists or other outside observers -- including U.S. military officials from the Defense Attache's office at the U.S. embassy in Cairo -- into the Peninsula. It would be helpful if U.S. strategists had more visibility regarding the situation on the ground in the Sinai. If Egypt were ever amenable, this could set the stage for a more robust U.S. advisory presence. Additionally, because Egypt is deploying U.S.-origin weapons systems in the fight, as accusations of human rights abuses mount, it will be important to either substantiate or refute the claims. This will require the presence of journalists on the ground.

Securing the border with Libya. The Obama administration has pressed Egypt to reprogram some of its \$1.3 billion in annual Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to deploy equipment and systems to help better secure the long, porous, and dangerous frontier between Egypt and Libya. Egypt has thus far refused. Egypt's atavistic attachment to expensive legacy systems -- like F-16s, M1A1 tanks, and Harpoon missiles -- with only marginal utility in the current threat environment is undermining state security. There is little appetite in Congress for increasing Egypt's \$1.3 billion in annual FMF. Washington has to do better in cajoling a recalcitrant Egypt into devoting financial resources to aerostat balloons, C4ISR systems, and even Black Hawk helicopters for rapid troop response to threats.

Sweetening the pot. Convincing Egypt to slow the purchase of extremely costly prestige weapons systems will be difficult. If disclosure permits, perhaps Washington could encourage Cairo to do so by offering to sell other high-value/high-prestige weapons systems, including armed drones, which would benefit operations along the Libyan border and over the Sinai.

Boosting dialogue on Libya. There is a complete disconnect between Cairo and Washington on Libya. Washington is backing talks between factions in Libya that Cairo believes have no chance of succeeding. Egypt believes Libyan Gen. Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity militia is the most moderate local military force and worthy of materiel support. Twice in recent years, Egypt has taken military action in Libya against IS without first notifying Washington. Increased understanding -- and perhaps coordination -- on Libya may be a more productive course of action, particularly in terms of future intelligence sharing.

Encouraging more Israel-Egypt cooperation. In August 2013, an Israeli drone operating with permission in Egyptian airspace reportedly killed five Islamist militants in the Peninsula. The quiet Israel-Egypt cooperation in the Sinai has been one of the few bright spots in the region, but it remains sensitive. Israel has advanced intelligence and kinetic capabilities to assist Egypt in counterinsurgency operations in the Sinai. The United States should continue to encourage this cooperation, and urge Sisi to deepen it from the highest echelons to the working levels.

Improving Egyptian airport security. Despite Cairo's reluctance to concede a bomb may have downed the Russian airliner over Sinai in October, the United States, Egypt, and the international community all have an interest in addressing concerns over airport security in Egypt. As the New York Times reported in November, European officials "have repeatedly complained that X-ray and explosive-detection equipment used to scan baggage is out of date, poorly maintained or poorly operated by inadequately trained staff members." This is a problem that Western financial and technical support can and should help solve.

Preventing further unproductive delays. In 2013, a congressional hold delayed the transfer of ten Apache attack helicopters for use in Egypt's counterinsurgency for a full year. The attack helicopter armed with Hellfire missiles is a preferred Egyptian platform for Sinai operations, and the Egyptian leadership was furious over the delay. Indeed, it confirmed to much of the top military leadership the conspiracy theory that Washington was supporting a return to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. While there were clearly reasons for holding the delivery, this tack did not serve U.S. or Egyptian interests. In the future, if the United States feels the need to withhold weapons systems for Egypt, the United States should be careful not to pick counterinsurgency tools.

Avoiding the leveraging of U.S. military assistance. While it doesn't seem like Egypt is taking the terrorism problem seriously, evidence suggests that the Sisi administration sees it as a grave threat. Cairo's human rights policies are problematic and perhaps even counterproductive to the state's long-term stability. But a cutoff in U.S. assistance will neither improve Cairo's conduct nor enhance the already fraught U.S.-Egypt relationship. Indeed, precedent suggests that withholding assistance would aggravate -- not moderate -- the worst tendencies in Egyptian governance. To get what it wants from Egypt, the United States must be more creative -- perhaps by floating the prospect of reintroducing early disbursement of aid, or selling Cairo unprecedented equipment, like drones. Now that Egypt is receiving billions in Gulf funding per year -- including substantial military aid -- Washington is no longer the only game in town.

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House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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May 4, 2024



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May 4, 2024



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