

# Obama Administration Should Be Helping Egypt, Not Punishing It

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## Helping Cairo defeat jihadis -- at minimum by delivering long-postponed weapons systems -- would be more productive than punishing it for its repressive approach in Sinai.

**L**ate last month the Egyptian military razed 800 houses in Rafah, a city situated on the border with Gaza. Cairo claims the heavy-handed action, which followed an Oct. 24 attack that killed 31 soldiers in northern Sinai, was necessary to stop the flow of weapons and militants from Gaza into the peninsula. But the "scorched earth" tactics drew immediate condemnation from the United Nations and bolstered calls for Washington to rethink its support for the generals.

Rafah further complicates the delivery of U.S. military aid to Egypt. Before the U.S. can dispense the final \$575.5 million of its \$1.3 billion in annual aid, Secretary of State John Kerry must certify that Egypt is taking steps toward democracy. The swift displacement of over 1100 families makes meeting that standard even harder.

But Washington should be more interested in helping Egypt defeat jihadis than in punishing Cairo for its repressive approach in Sinai. After all, Sinai-based terrorists have killed over 500 Egyptian security personnel in the past three years, staged cross-border attacks against Israel and, in some cases, mimicked ISIS's beheading tactics. The recent announcement that Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, Sinai's most lethal jihadi group, has sworn allegiance to ISIS makes it incumbent on Washington to start working more closely with Egypt on counterterrorism.

To be sure, criticism of the Egyptian military's action is warranted. The mass-raiding of homes in Rafah was strategically misguided. While Cairo has blamed Hamas' control of Gaza for the upsurge in violence, Sinai-based jihadism is, in fact, indigenous -- and a consequence of a decades-long Egyptian policy of developmental neglect and repressive governance in the peninsula. Cairo, with its latest actions, risks further alienating a population that already regards the state with severe distrust, possibly encouraging more Sinai citizens to support the jihadis.

But these criticisms are rarely heard in Egypt, because the Egyptian public broadly views a strong -- even repressive -- state as necessary for addressing a wide variety of threats. Domestically, Egyptians face a significant upsurge in terrorism in multiple directions: from Sinai-based jihadis in the east and Libya-based militants in the west. They also fear the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose cadres have reportedly shut down roads, attacked police stations and sabotaged electricity towers since the military responded to mass protests by ousting former Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi from the presidential palace last July. And regionally, Egyptians see an environment in which disorder has become the norm, with states collapsing in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

These fears should mean that security -- not democracy -- is the top priority for a critical mass of Egyptians, who view their military's Sinai campaign as vital for defeating domestic terrorism and avoiding the chaotic regional trend. Given the deadly nature of the threats Egyptians face, Western condemnation of the military's tactics in Sinai will invariably be interpreted as hostile. For this reason, if the U.S. wants Egypt to fight terrorists in Sinai with greater consideration for human rights -- and, more importantly, with greater effectiveness -- Washington should act as a partner, rather than a sideline player.

At a minimum, a real partnership would necessitate the administration taking steps to ensure that counterterrorism-related military materiel is provided to Egypt without undue delay. The interminable postponement this year of the delivery of 10 Apache helicopters not only frustrated Cairo and stressed the bilateral relationship -- it undermined the Sinai counterterrorism campaign. Withholding this type of critical equipment serves neither Egyptian nor Israeli nor U.S. regional interests. Beyond the timely supply of weapons systems and ammunition, the U.S. could provide the Egyptian military with technical assistance -- and perhaps disclose operational intelligence for targeting -- to help minimize collateral damage in the Sinai.

Perhaps more importantly, to help Egypt secure the Sinai, Washington should assist Cairo in stemming the flow of weapons and personnel from Libya, which has become a failed state since the fall of Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. Specifically, Washington should expand its technical and material assistance directed at this problematic border, including the U.S.-funded training program on maritime interdiction.

At the same time, Washington should be more cautious in its attempts to limit Egyptian preventive kinetic action in Libya. Following a joint UAE-Egypt airstrike in August targeting terrorists across the border, the administration complained that "outside interference in Libya exacerbates current divisions and undermines Libya's democratic transition." Notwithstanding the administration's characterization, what is occurring now in Libya more closely resembles a civil war than a "democratic transition." Instead of trying to restrain Egypt, Washington should quietly praise Cairo for its proactivity, a tack that might provide an opportunity to shape -- rather than be surprised by -- future such actions.

Finally, in addition to providing Egypt with the necessary tools to achieve a military solution, Washington should partner with Cairo to help establish an economic plan to make Sinai and the Western Desert less hospitable environments for terrorists. While economic development alone will not defeat Islamist militancy, over time it just might diminish some of the hostility toward the state among these disaffected Egyptians.

Today, it's not clear whether Egypt is winning its war against terrorism. Given the importance of their longstanding strategic relationship -- and that fact that the U.S. and Egypt are now both fighting ISIS jihadis -- it's time for

Washington to lean in. The current Egyptian regime has demonstrated a unique commitment to fighting terrorists. Washington should assist Cairo in waging that war more effectively, as well as humanely.

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