

# U.S. Support to Counter Egypt's Insurgency (Still) on Hold

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## The policy of conditioning delivery of Apache helicopters and other equipment enhances neither freedom in Egypt nor the prospect of defeating Islamist militants in the Sinai.

**W**ith the intense focus on the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) -- which recently shortened its name to the Islamic State (IS) when it declared a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq -- scant attention has been paid to the Islamic insurgency in Egypt. Since the 2011 toppling of President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt has faced a persistent rebellion in the Sinai Peninsula by al-Qaeda affiliates hoping to establish their own Islamic emirate. But unlike Baghdad, which is currently receiving urgent deliveries of cutting-edge U.S. weapons, Cairo has seen much of its U.S. military assistance suspended since the 2013 coup d'etat that ousted Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi. While the Obama administration pledged in April to resume deliveries of equipment -- most prominently ten Apache attack helicopters that would likely be deployed in the Sinai theater -- critical counterterrorism systems remain in U.S. storage.

## Background

**A**lthough the Obama administration never characterized the Egyptian military's July 3, 2013, removal of Morsi as a "coup d'etat" -- a designation that would have legally compelled Washington to halt arms transfers -- it did temporarily suspend delivery of several prominent weapons systems, including F-16 fighter jets, Harpoon missiles, M1A1 tank kits, and Apache helicopters. Earlier this year, Congress revised the law to condition provision of U.S. military assistance on ostensibly democratic transitional procedures such as the holding of a constitutional referendum, and parliamentary and presidential elections. With the June 2014 inauguration of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as president, it appeared that the U.S. arms spigot would soon reopen.

But the sentencing in late June of three Aljazeera journalists to ten years in prison, and death penalty convictions of 183 Muslim Brotherhood members, including Supreme Guide Muhammad Badie, on terrorism charges, raised

human rights concerns in Congress and the administration, derailing a full resumption of military aid. Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who chairs the Appropriations Subcommittee on State Department, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, was so troubled by developments that he placed \$650 million -- one half of Egypt's biannual military assistance tranche -- on hold. While Senator Leahy subsequently agreed to release \$572 million in obligated U.S. military funding, he continues to block delivery of the ten Apaches, saying he will do so until he sees "convincing evidence that [Cairo] is committed to the rule of law."

## Ongoing Insurgency

Since 2011, Islamist militants have launched dozens of attacks against security forces and tourists in the Sinai. To date, according to the Egyptian military, nearly five hundred security officials have been killed in the terror campaign. Over the past six months alone, Sinai-based militants have perpetrated several high-profile, high-casualty operations, resulting in the deaths of twenty-four Egyptian security officials.

In January, for example, the al-Qaeda affiliate Ansar Beit al-Maqdis claimed credit for downing a Russian-made helicopter over the northern Sinai, killing five soldiers. A day later, four army recruits were slain when their bus was attacked in the southern part of the peninsula. Then, in February, three South Korean tourists were killed when their bus was bombed near the Israeli border in Taba. The next month, three officers were killed -- including a brigadier and a colonel in the police force -- and four Egyptian officers were gunned down in late June near al-Arish. And the list goes on.

Egyptian authorities claim they are making significant progress in reestablishing security in the Sinai. Almost daily, the military issues statements to the press -- which the Egyptian leadership has banned from the area ostensibly to prevent unfavorable coverage -- of arrests, seizures of weapons caches, and discoveries of improvised explosive devices. Two months ago, the army announced it had killed Abu Ubaydah, the leader of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis.

Based on army statements, victory in the Sinai is near. Despite these apparent gains on the ground, however, the Islamists show no sign of surrender. Just last month, the Egyptian daily *al-Masry al-Youm* reported that fifteen ISIS members were captured while attempting to infiltrate into Sinai via a Gaza tunnel.

## A New Page

Since Sisi's inauguration, the Obama administration has sought to improve the tense atmospherics of U.S.-Egypt ties. The White House readout of President Obama's June 10 congratulatory phone call to President Sisi was short but bullish on the relationship. Notwithstanding Secretary of State John Kerry's characterization of the Aljazeera verdict as "chilling, draconian...[and] a deeply disturbing setback to Egypt's transition," his June 22 meeting with President Sisi was likewise widely reported as positive and productive. The overall narrative of Kerry's Egypt visit was upbeat, focusing on the enduring bilateral partnership and the U.S. commitment to "seeing Egypt succeed."

But thorny issues remain. While the administration has certified that Cairo is sustaining the strategic relationship with Washington and adhering to its treaty obligations with Israel, according to White House spokesman Josh Earnest, as of June 24 Egypt had "yet to meet the requirements for reinstatement [of the military assistance], including taking steps to ensure a democratic transition." Until these requirements are met, the Apache helicopters will remain on pallets in Fort Hood, Texas, awaiting transport to Egypt.

## Apaches Emerge as an Irritant

According to Freedom House, in the year since the July 2013 coup, Egypt has witnessed a stunning regression in freedom and rule of law. Crackdowns on Islamist and secular critics have spiked and independent media has been repressed amidst a "shockingly arbitrary" legal environment. Given Egypt's trajectory -- and the standard currently being applied by the U.S. government -- it is unclear when or if the Apaches will ever be delivered.

The Apaches are likely to remain an irritant in the bilateral relationship for some time. Meanwhile, Cairo has sought to fill the gap by purchasing arms from Moscow, including but not limited to attack helicopters. Egyptian officials represent this tack as an unfortunate but necessary diversification in the face of an unreliable U.S. supplier. After all, regardless of how the administration proceeds, attack helicopters will remain a principal Egyptian asset in combating the Sinai insurgency. Egypt currently has thirty-four Apaches in its arsenal, of which twelve are nonoperational due to maintenance issues and delayed delivery of spare parts.

## Policy Implications

Given developments in Syria and Iraq, for Washington the provision of counterterrorism equipment to Egypt shouldn't be controversial. Yet the calculus isn't so simple. Despite the absence of journalists, reports emerging from the peninsula suggest that collateral damage and human rights abuses are significant. According to some estimates, as of April the military had been responsible for more than three hundred civilian deaths in northern Sinai. On the flipside, in addition to deploying Apaches against militants in the Sinai, Egypt is using Apaches to secure the 120-mile-long Suez Canal, a critical mission particularly since two rocket-propelled grenades were fired at a ship traversing the waterway last summer.

Because Washington and Cairo share an interest in the Sinai counterterrorism campaign, it is incumbent that the United States provide its "strategic ally" with the necessary tools for mission success. While journalist boots on the ground in the Sinai would be optimal in terms of transparency for Egypt and meeting U.S. congressional stipulations, the administration has other means to ascertain happenings in the Sinai, and can privately share this information with Congress. In any event, for Washington, freedom of the press in the Sinai is no less a priority than freedom of the press in Cairo. And Sisi's Egypt clearly has a problem on both counts.

The United States can and should hold Egypt accountable for its atrocious human rights record -- in both the Sinai and the Nile Valley. At the same time, however, the administration, at least for now, should prioritize the Sinai. Close U.S. monitoring of developments in the peninsula can help determine whether American equipment is being deployed appropriately by the Egyptian military. Based on assessments, the policy can be modified. If necessary, should Egypt not meet minimum human rights standards in the Sinai, Washington can effectively ground the Apaches by compelling the withdrawal of U.S. maintenance contractors.

While Sisi's Egypt is unlikely to respond positively to "conditionality," if the administration must do so, it should at least try to preserve some U.S. equities in the process. Hence, to demonstrate its concerns on the human rights and rule of law front, Washington would be better advised to consider delaying delivery of military materiel other than Apaches like Harpoons and tank kits -- that are important to Egypt but extraneous to the counterterrorism campaign.

As currently constituted, the U.S. policy of conditioning provision of the Apaches enhances neither freedom in Egypt nor the prospect of defeating Islamist militants in the Sinai. Because the future of Egypt depends on both, it's incumbent on the administration to find a different formula.

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