

Resuming Military Aid to Egypt: A Strategic Imperative

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Brief Analysis

Given the important strategic interests at stake and the unlikelihood of changing Cairo's short-term behavior, Secretary Kerry should be prepared to use all available options to keep the aid flowing.

The Obama administration's attempt to resume military aid to Egypt faces critical opposition in Congress. On Tuesday, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who chairs the subcommittee that oversees foreign aid, placed a hold on the administration's April 25 request for \$650 million in military assistance to Egypt, stating that committee needed to see "convincing evidence the government is committed to the rule of law." A bipartisan group of senators backed his efforts.

While concerns regarding Egypt's repressive trajectory are well placed, the administration should urgently press its case. If the aid remains frozen, the United States risks losing the strategic benefits derived from its military-assistance relationship with Cairo. Withholding aid is also unlikely to influence Egypt's domestic political behavior in the short run, and will undermine Washington's ability to influence Cairo in the future, when such pressure might have a greater impact.

The renewed calls to withhold aid came in the wake of two Egyptian court decisions announced on Monday, in which 720 alleged Muslim Brotherhood members were sentenced to death for the killing of two police officers. The calls also reflect mounting dismay at Cairo's unrelenting repression since the military responded to mass protests by removing President Muhammad Morsi last summer. According to Michele Dunne and Scott Williamson of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, over 2,500 civilians were killed between July 2013 and January 2014, in addition to 17,000 wounded and 18,000 detained. The crackdown has also broadened beyond the disempowered Brotherhood: activists campaigning against the January constitutional referendum were recently sentenced to three years in prison, and the courts have outlawed the revolutionary April 6 Youth Movement, which backed Morsi's ouster.

Again, while concerns about these developments are justified, the call to withhold military aid misunderstands both

the nature of the current Egyptian government and Washington's capacity for influencing it. Unlike the Hosni Mubarak era, when power was largely centralized in the dictator's hands, the new government is severely fractured, with competing power centers -- particularly the military, police, and judiciary -- acting independently. Withholding aid occasionally compelled Mubarak to change his behavior, but that tool will not work as effectively now because the state's fractured nature means that each institution controls little outside of its own domain. For example, the military now has little influence over the judiciary and therefore cannot undo the hundreds of death sentences that the courts have issued recently, most of which will likely be commuted on appeal. Indeed, top-ranking generals privately say that they not only oppose these sentences, but are profoundly embarrassed by them.

Under these circumstances, U.S. military aid can reliably impact only one thing: the Egyptian military's external behavior. To be sure, the military has its own reasons for maintaining strategic cooperation with Washington -- apart from the fact that a majority of Egypt's arsenal consists of American-made weapons, many of its officers have trained in U.S. military academies, and policies such as maintaining the peace treaty with Israel and fighting terrorism in the Sinai are in its own interest. Even so, withholding aid could still jeopardize Washington's ability to ensure Egypt's longer-term cooperation. For one thing, Russia is trying to expand its influence in the Middle East by selling weapons to Cairo, and various Persian Gulf states -- which have sent billions in aid to keep the current Egyptian government afloat -- are strongly supporting Moscow's efforts. Moreover, after years of refusing to do so, the Egyptian military has been actively fighting Sinai-based jihadists since September, so withholding aid now would send a very confusing message about Washington's strategic priorities. The United States also stands to lose other strategic benefits if the aid is withheld, including overflight rights and preferred access to the Suez Canal.

Finally, the deeply fractured government currently running Egypt might become more consolidated a few months from now, when former defense minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi will likely be president. Under those circumstances, using military aid to encourage a more progressive political atmosphere might make a difference. But if Washington withholds aid now, it will lose the leverage needed to influence Cairo down the road, in addition to having no significant effect on Egypt's troubling trajectory in the short term. For all of these reasons, Secretary of State John Kerry should be prepared to use what options are available to him to ensure the aid continues.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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