

Egypt Remains Confused by White House Policy

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Conversations with senior Egyptian officials indicate that Washington should focus on preserving its strategically important geopolitical interests, not on using aid suspensions to influence the country's domestic politics.

There is consensus among Egypt's political elite that no country could replace the strategic relationship with the United States. At the same time, the hallways of power in Egypt are filled with strong sentiment of disappointment towards the Obama White House. After being in Egypt for two weeks and having conducted numerous meetings with senior government officials and major political figures, it seems clear that Egypt's government remains determined to maintain a strong relationship with Washington.

The recent simultaneous visit of both the Russian defense and foreign ministers to Cairo has raised many questions about the broader strategic significance of this move for the US-Egyptian relationship. Egyptian-Russian cooperation should not to be seen as a pivot away from Washington. Yet it should also not come as a surprise, especially after the White House decision to suspend major portions of military aid to Egypt during the government shutdown debacle, which naturally forced Egypt to broaden its security cooperation ties with other countries to preserve its basic national security priorities. If Obama's decision intends to impact the course of domestic politics in Egypt, all senior Egyptian government officials made it clear he had made a huge miscalculation. There are mutual strategic justifications that guide the US-Egyptian security relationship, which the suspension of aid does not help move forward.

The Egyptian military has been entrenched in a critical and difficult fight in Sinai against major terrorist cells, which were allowed to establish a major stronghold there during the one-year rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. This reality directly jeopardized both Egyptian and Israeli national security and threatened regional stability.

In August, two buses carrying 25 Egyptian soldiers were ambushed by terrorists, and the soldiers were killed execution style. This reality should have dictated stronger support from Washington for the Egyptian military's efforts to combat terrorism in the Sinai. However, the exact opposite happened when the White House decided to

suspend military aid and the delivery of weapons, which included the weapon of choice, the Apache attack helicopters used in the fight against Sinai terrorists. Even if not all weapons are directly used in that fight, the suspension affects cooperation and trust between the two countries. Egypt's political leadership is confused by the White House's intentions.

The Obama administration has not specified criteria for the resumption of the military aid and seems to have purposely kept its policy vague. Different messages are communicated to the Egyptian government from the Pentagon and State Department on the one side, and the White House on the other. This is understandable after it was revealed that there are huge tensions between National Security Adviser Susan Rice and Secretary of State John Kerry concerning US policy towards Egypt. This kind of ambiguity only serves to undermine the strategic US-Egyptian relationship and jeopardize mutual interests at a time when the region faces great upheaval. The pillar of the relationship has always depended on military and security cooperation, and using this partnership as a bargaining chip to shape Egyptian domestic politics has been counterproductive and has only hurt mutual interests in the region.

If the rationale behind the Obama administration's policy is based on the fact that it views the removal of Morsi as an undemocratic step, it is important to realize that the Brotherhood regime was not a democratic one in the first place. Morsi's constitutional declaration in November of 2012, which granted him absolute powers and put him above the law, violated all principles of democracy. Washington ignored the violent crackdown that followed on protestors who opposed Morsi's authoritarian powers. At that time, the Obama administration stood by silently -- it did not preach to Morsi about democracy or suspend military aid to Egypt. The White House has taken contradictory positions over the past three years, sometimes putting principles above interests or vice versa; hence the confusion in Cairo.

For democracy to really flourish in Egypt, patience is key, as it will take time. But one thing is for sure: a close strategic security relationship between the United States and Egypt should not be hindered by dictates concerning domestic politics, especially nowadays when the majority of Egyptians are satisfied with the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power. Washington should not put itself in the driver's seat as the main advocate for the future of the Brotherhood in Egyptian politics, as it will only put more tension on the US-Egyptian relationship. Washington's policy toward Egypt ought to preserve its strategically important geopolitical interests and let Egyptians determine their own domestic political future.

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