Obama Just Made a Terrible Mistake on Egypt

by **Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)**

Oct 9, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

Cutting aid will cost Washington substantial influence in Egypt without achieving any gains for either American geostrategy or democratic prospects within the country.

In a certain sense, the Obama administration's decision to withhold much of the $1.3 billion in annual aid given to Egypt isn't surprising. U.S. law mandates cutting off aid to countries in which a coup has taken place, and the Egyptian military's ouster of President Mohamed Morsi this summer was, analytically speaking, exactly that. Moreover, the Egyptian military's behavior during the three months since Morsi's removal has made Egypt's slide towards enhanced autocracy impossible to ignore: Over 1,000 people have been killed in the military-backed government's crackdown on pro-Morsi protests; journalists who criticize the military have been prosecuted in military courts; and the new constitution will likely further shield the military from any kind of civilian oversight.

Indeed, the generals are not democrats, and never have been. They are bureaucratic actors who selfishly guard their bureaucratic privileges, which include autonomy over their internal affairs and control over vast economic assets (for example, among other consumer products, the Egyptian military produces bottled water), and they know that true democracy could cost them these perquisites. But cutting off aid won't make the military democratic, and it will come at a substantial cost: namely, the ability to encourage the military in a more progressive direction down the road, when the environment might be riper for a more assertively pro-democratic U.S. policy in Egypt.

The calls to cut off military aid in the aftermath of Morsi's ouster reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of what transpired in Egypt this past summer. To say, as is frequently said, that the military removed a democratically elected president from office is to overlook a very basic reality: that by the time unprecedentedly mass protests against the Muslim Brotherhood's rule commenced on June 30, Mohamed Morsi was a president in name only. Morsi's November 2012 constitutional declaration, which put his own edicts above judicial scrutiny, and his subsequent ramming of an Islamist constitution through to ratification, severely undercut his popular legitimacy, and shrunk his support in a country of 85 million people down to the Brotherhood's base of approximately 500,000

members. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to dispatch its cadres to brutally attack and torture protesters outside the presidential palace on December 5 led many Egyptians to view the Brotherhood -- an organization that they had elected only months earlier -- as an emerging fascist regime. From that point forward, protests against Morsi's rule became so frequent and destabilizing that by late January, the military -- at Morsi's request -- assumed control over the three major Suez Canal cities.

At the same time, Morsi's appointment of perhaps thousands of completely inexperienced Muslim Brothers to executive positions across Egypt's massive bureaucracy catalyzed substantial resistance to his rule within the state itself. This was something that Morsi's own Brotherhood appointees acknowledged. But rather than trying to build consensus within their respective bureaucracies, Brotherhood ministers instead diverted governmental resources directly to Brotherhood-affiliated organizations, thereby exacerbating the resistance within their bureaucracies to their authority. By June 30, uniformed officers from the same police force that once backed the Muslim Brotherhood's assault on protesters were now protesting *against* him, alongside millions of Egyptians in the streets. And shortly thereafter, Morsi's ministers began resigning from his government. Morsi, in other words, had completely lost control, and his refusal to negotiate a political resolution to the crisis -- and his explicit preference for martyrdom over politics -- made his reassertion of control virtually impossible.

When a president of a country of 85 million, mostly impoverished, people loses control, there are no happy endings. Indeed, some truly gruesome possibilities suddenly become probable: violent uprisings, assassinations, civil wars, and, yes, military coups. And despite the Egyptian military's undemocratic outlook, the generals very much wanted to avoid a coup. As military officials emphasized for months leading up to Morsi's ouster, their experience running Egypt following Hosni Mubarak's 2011 ouster was a sour one. Their training, they said, was in fighting wars and defending borders, not in policing cities and handling sanitation. More to the point, the generals effectively got what they wanted under Morsi: The Brotherhood's constitution granted the military unprecedented autonomy over its internal affairs, including its control over major economic assets. And Morsi affirmed his acceptance of the military's exception to democratic oversight in April, when he buried a state report highlighting the military's abuses in power following the 2011 uprising. It was, in other words, a good deal for the military -- but one that became entirely unsustainable as Morsi lost control of the country.

Yet despite the military's reluctance to remove Morsi, its ultimate decision to do so put it in direct confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. This is, quite frankly, the way coups work: Those that seize power seek to ensure that those they removed cannot return to power, because this would almost certainly mean death for the new rulers. This is why the Egyptian military moved to decapitate the Brotherhood from the moment Morsi was removed. And many -- perhaps most -- Egyptians share the military's fear of a resurgent Muslim Brotherhood, which is why they have broadly endorsed the military's brutal crackdown on the organization.

It is a dynamic that Washington cannot change even if it wanted to, because it is virtually impossible to exert influence on actors who are engaged in an existential struggle. And the administration's policy towards Egypt since Morsi's ouster has undercut its potential influence further. By insisting that the military negotiate and even reconcile with the Brotherhood, the administration made the generals fear that they would be pressured into their own suicides, and the administration thus lost the ability to at least achieve the more conservative goal of preventing an all-out assault by security forces on the Brotherhood's protests. Meanwhile, in its equivocal public posture regarding Morsi's removal, the administration exacerbated Egyptians' paranoid belief that the U.S. desires Brotherhood rule in Egypt -- which Egyptians view as far, far more threatening than military rule. Cutting off military aid now -- only two days after Egypt was hit with three terrorist attacks -- will only reinforce these anxieties, and will mean losing a point of leverage that the U.S. might be able to use in the future, when the political environment in Egypt might be more hospitable for pushing the country in a more progressive direction.

And rest assured: That moment will surely come. If the past two-plus years have taught us anything about Egypt, it's that newly emerging regimes quickly fall out of public favor as they become more autocratic. Much as Egyptians turned on the military leaders who assumed control of the country in February 2011, and much as they rebelled against the Muslim Brotherhood leader who won the presidential election in June 2012, they will likely bristle before long under the current regime, particularly as Egypt's economy continues to tumble. If the U.S. desires a stable Egypt, it is at that moment that the U.S. will want to use its leverage to encourage the generals to lower their political sights, and permit a more inclusive and democratic politics.

But if the U.S. cuts aid now, it won't be able to have that conversation then. It will also put at risk U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation that is of significant value to U.S. strategy in the Middle East, which includes U.S. overflight rights and preferred access in the Suez Canal. And by only keeping the portion of the aid that is designed for counterterrorism operations and border control, the administration will reinforce the perception in Egypt that the military aid's primary purpose is to keep Israel safe, and that Washington does not care about Egyptians' well-being.

Cutting aid, in other words, is a lose-lose proposition: It will cost Washington substantial influence within Egypt without achieving any gains for either American geostrategy or democratic prospects within Egypt. It is an unforced error in the extreme.

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

New Republic

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)