

Helping the Dust Settle: Why Washington Cannot Cut Aid to Egypt

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Brief Analysis

Cutting aid to Egypt would only hurt U.S. interests there without helping democracy, stability, or any other cause.

A shorter version of this article previously appeared on *Fikra Forum* (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=3607>).

For the time being, last month's acute arguments over cutting U.S. aid to Egypt because of its military coup and subsequent bloody crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood all seem like ancient history. They have been eclipsed by the Obama administration's decision to keep almost all of that aid intact through the end of this fiscal year, and by the return of something resembling normalcy in Cairo. Most of all, discussion of Egypt has been overshadowed by the latest awful twist in the Syrian civil war.

But Egyptian issues will undoubtedly resurface before too long: as next year's budget comes up for consideration toward the end of this month; as new tensions likely erupt inside Egypt or in U.S.-Egyptian relations; or as new arguments emerge about the troubled course of democracy and the poverty of U.S. strategy in the Middle East. For these reasons, now is a good time to consider the longer-term dimensions of the Egyptian aid conundrum. That way, Washington is more likely to adopt a considered strategy, at least about Egypt, rather than merely reacting to the latest crisis du jour or revisiting old arguments in different circumstances and altered garb.

Proponents of ending or suspending aid due to the coup offer various rationales above and beyond pure legalism. First is that this leverage will help restore democracy in Egypt. Second is simply to distance the United States from whatever happens next in Egypt, in order to avoid further blame and further charges of "democrisy" (hypocrisy about democracy). Third, and closely related, is the claim that continuing to aid Egypt's military will also aid the jihadist "narrative." This narrative allegedly argues, among other things, that democracy and Western support for it are no more than a charade, and that violence is therefore justified as the only way to impose Islam. Fourth, some accuse the Egyptian army of deliberately provoking Muslim Brotherhood violence in order to extort more aid from

Washington. The appropriate response, they say, is to reject such blackmail and cut the aid instead.

All of these arguments are entirely specious, even granted that the military's bloody assault on the Brotherhood sit-in was ill advised. First, U.S. aid is demonstrably not enough to convince any Egyptian government to commit suicide. It is, moreover, demonstrably and easily replaceable by Saudi and other Arab (and perhaps even Russian) aid and/or arms. In addition, the reality is that neither the Brotherhood nor the army is a reliable custodian of true democracy. Better to factor that idealistic but unrealistic objective out of the equation than to engage in fantasies about it and build real policy on that illusory foundation. Otherwise Washington will simply sacrifice a decent working relationship with Egypt -- by far the most populous Arab country, and still among the most strategically important -- for no discernible gain.

Second, the sad truth is that many Egyptians will continue to blame the United States for whatever happens there. Cutting aid now will merely add another unjust accusation to the existing imaginary charge sheet. As for hypocrisy, it would be even more hypocritical to ruin relations with a country that has at least experimented with democracy while maintaining ties with others (e.g., Saudi Arabia and China) that have never moved one step in that direction. And what of this hypocrisy: supporting the Egyptian military's move in response to mass protests against Hosni Mubarak, but not against Muhammad Morsi?

Third, jihadists demonstrably do not need a "narrative" about democracy to believe in jihad. Even more to the point, what matters most in the fight against violent extremism is not who wins the battle of narratives, but who wins the actual battle. Given the Egyptian military's preponderance of power and popular support, it is much more likely to win that fight than are any violent jihadists, be they Muslim Brothers or others. The United States has a clear and compelling interest in helping achieve that outcome rather than arguing about how the battle began. That interest is completely and legitimately selfish, and separate from any calculation about America's allies in Saudi Arabia, Israel, or elsewhere in the region.

Fourth, the last, desperate argument about giving in to "blackmail" is merely the mirror image -- further distorted by distance -- of all the absurd conspiracy theories so prevalent in the region. To think that Egypt's generals are actually encouraging violence against themselves merely to keep their paltry billion dollars in U.S. aid defies every standard of logic, evidence, and common sense. Quite the contrary: it is more plausible that the West's public pressure on the military has encouraged the Brotherhood to keep fighting, thus prolonging Egypt's agony.

None of these rationales promises to achieve anything positive -- only to avoid blame or blackmail, with no good reason to suppose even that will work. Nevertheless, all of these specious arguments may yet influence U.S. policy, at least to the extent of pushing it toward the worst of all possible worlds: symbolic but self-defeating half-measures. Most egregious would be restricting economic though not military aid to Egypt. What kind of confused message would that send?

Instead, and for the long term, Washington should firmly support Egypt's new military and civilian leaders as they attempt to restore order and revive their country's devastated economy. That is the course most likely (though hardly guaranteed) to yield stability, thus serving the interests of both the Egyptian people and the United States.

It is fine to counsel restraint and inclusiveness in private, of course. Yet publicly berating the new rulers in Cairo would probably make matters in the real world even worse while exposing Western impotence, even if it makes U.S. leaders feel self-righteous. Far better to work on adjusting U.S. rhetoric to this reality rather than the other way around.

Egypt's people deserve democracy, and they and their leaders will likely move in that direction again someday. But that is not their top priority right now, nor should it be Washington's. So when the arguments for cutting aid predictably resurface in the near future, it would be well to say that the issue has already been settled for the long

term -- in favor of solid U.S.-Egyptian-relations.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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