

An Agenda for Secretary Hagel in Egypt

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Brief Analysis

During his Cairo visit, Secretary Hagel should press the Egyptian military for a franker exchange of views, including on aid, the Sinai, and political transparency.

When Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visits Egypt later this week, his meeting with President Muhammad Morsi will likely garner much of the media attention. But Hagel's discussion with his Egyptian counterpart, Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, will be more consequential. Beyond conveying U.S. concerns about persistent instability in the Sinai -- a problem highlighted by last week's terrorist rocket attack on the Israeli city of Eilat -- Hagel should use his meeting with Sisi to emphasize a broad range of bilateral defense matters.

BACKGROUND

Secretary Hagel's trip coincides with a spike in domestic instability in Egypt. Since President Morsi's November 22 constitutional declaration, through which he claimed virtually unchecked executive authority and then rushed an Islamist-dominated constitutional process to ratification, the non-Islamist opposition has been protesting the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, with demonstrations often devolving into violence. The Brotherhood's refusal to govern more inclusively has only exacerbated the situation. In January, the ongoing unrest forced the government to cede control of three major Suez Canal cities to the military, which implemented martial law.

Absent an unlikely change in Morsi's approach, the deterioration will continue in the coming months. The next parliamentary elections have been postponed indefinitely, and the Brotherhood's bid to "cleanse" the judiciary and

"Brotherhoodize" the Interior Ministry, among other institutions, will intensify resistance to its rule. Meanwhile, as Egypt's economy continues to founder, fuel shortages and rolling electricity blackouts have become commonplace and are expected to continue throughout the summer, driving even more popular dissatisfaction with Cairo.

A DEFENSE-ORIENTED AGENDA

While Secretary Hagel will undoubtedly express U.S. concerns about Egypt's political trajectory during his meeting with President Morsi, the primary focus of his trip should be the long list of defense-related matters over which the Egyptian military continues to retain exclusive control. Given this context, the agenda for the secretary's meeting with Defense Minister Sisi should do the following:

Emphasize Sinai security. While the recent attack on Eilat, perpetrated by the Sinai-based jihadist organization Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahedin, resulted in no Israeli injuries, since January 2011 terrorists have attempted repeatedly to target Israel from Sinai in an effort to undermine the Camp David Accords. Even as Israeli officials say that coordination with the Egyptian military remains strong -- and some, like Ministry of Defense official Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilad, say it is better than ever -- the Egyptian military has shown little inclination or aptitude for stabilizing the peninsula. Secretary Hagel should convey to his counterpart the urgency of establishing security in the Sinai and the importance Washington assigns to the military's enthusiasm for this mission.

Start a conversation about restructuring Foreign Military Financing. Egypt's military is poorly suited for securing the Sinai, and the current structure of U.S. military assistance -- in which \$1.3 billion is given annually for mostly buying F-16s, tanks, and replacement parts -- is not sufficiently helping Cairo address the rising terrorism and smuggling threat from within its own territory. While restructuring U.S. military aid to Egypt is the third rail of the bilateral relationship, Secretary Hagel should nonetheless initiate a discussion about how U.S. assistance can be better allocated -- either in terms of equipment purchases or for training Egyptian soldiers in counterterrorism and counternarcotics through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program -- to implement this mission. No doubt, this will be a difficult and awkward conversation, but this type of candid exchange should be possible after more than thirty-five years of security cooperation.

Insist on more frank exchanges between friends. While many in Washington attribute the Egyptian military's refusal to fire on protestors during the 2011 uprising to its longstanding strategic relationship with Washington, this reflects a more self-congratulatory than evidence-based assessment. In fact, Washington possessed little insight into how the Egyptian military would respond under the circumstances, because -- despite providing Egypt with more than \$70 billion in assistance since 1979 -- the United States has little knowledge of the views of Egypt's midlevel officer corps. (This makes the Egyptian military vastly different from other militaries that receive substantial U.S. military aid, such as Jordan and Israel, whose midlevel officers frequently interact with their American counterparts.) Given that instability is likely to persist for years to come, it will be increasingly important for Washington to have better access to -- and a deeper understanding of -- Egypt's military officers, especially in light of rising popular demands for a military coup against the Morsi government, which 82 percent of Egyptians now support according to a recent poll. Secretary Hagel should ask Defense Minister Sisi for deeper military-to-military exchanges to better understand the Egyptian military's political outlook and decisionmaking during a crisis.

Express concern about the Brotherhood's entrance into military academies. Washington not only lacks insight into the Egyptian military's short-term political goals, it is also uncertain about how the organization will evolve over time. In this context, the announcement last month that the military had lifted the ban on admitting Brotherhood members into its academies should be of concern to Washington. The Brotherhood does not share the Egyptian military's commitment to a strategic partnership with the United States and peace with Israel: it is deeply hostile to the West, and its aim of establishing a "global Islamic state," in the words of Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater, is inconsistent with Egypt's international obligations. Likewise, the fact that all Muslim Brothers swear an

Islamic oath (*baya*) to "listen to and obey" the organization's leadership undermines the military chain of command. Given the substantial investment that the United States has made -- and will likely continue to make -- in the Egyptian military, Secretary Hagel should ask about the extent of Brotherhood recruitment into the military, and what steps are being taken to ensure discipline within the ranks. The secretary should further push to broaden the IMET program to develop a set of common interests throughout the military's chain of command.

Encourage the military to become more transparent. Given that military-to-military cooperation is the backbone of the broader U.S.-Egypt relationship, Washington should be especially concerned about how the Egyptian military's behavior affects its reputation and power at home. In this vein, the recent *Guardian* report regarding the military's abuses during the 2011 uprising -- which include forced disappearances, torture, and killing of protestors -- threatens to undermine public trust in the one institution with which Washington maintains a close relationship, and one of the few functioning national institutions left in Egypt. While Morsi responded to this report by promoting top generals and thereby signaling his support for the military, this is likely because the Brotherhood is not eager for a confrontation with the military right now -- and not because it intends to accept the military's current level of autonomy indefinitely. For this reason, Secretary Hagel should encourage Defense Minister Sisi to make the military transparent and hold abusive officers accountable now, before the Brotherhood exploits military excesses to undermine the generals' standing. The secretary should further encourage the military to make its vast economic resources more transparent, so that this wealth cannot be used against the military as the Egyptian economy deteriorates.

Judging Success

Given the nature of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government, prospects for improved U.S.-Egypt political relations are bleak. This dynamic makes Washington's relationship with the Egyptian military even more important moving forward. In recent decades, however, even the military-to-military relationship has stagnated, with Washington's financial assistance essentially purchasing Egypt's strategic cooperation on a short but important list of issues, such as the maintenance of the peace treaty with Israel.

Secretary Hagel's trip is an opportunity to move away from what has become a transactional relationship and toward a partnership grounded in addressing both countries' strategic interests. This includes not only protecting Egypt from regional threats, but also insulating the military as an institution domestically. To be sure, none of these proposed agenda items will make for a comfortable conversation, but in light of the dramatic changes since 2011 and the ongoing debate in Washington about military aid to Egypt, building a more candid and open relationship between the Pentagon and the Egyptian military is a top priority.

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