

## Washington's Limited Influence in Egypt

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### Despite devoting more than thirty years and \$50 billion to secure the peace, Washington now finds itself with precious little influence in Egypt.

News from Egypt is not good. Six months after the revolution, demonstrators in Tahrir Square are no longer protesting the Mubarak regime, but the military's own undemocratic governing practices. Meanwhile, the economy is deteriorating and the security situation -- in the Sinai and the Nile Valley -- remains uncertain. Capping it off, the Israeli embassy in Cairo was overrun last week, and both liberal and Islamist Egyptians alike are calling to revise if not scrap the Camp David peace treaty. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) responsible for managing transition appears to be floundering.

Washington used to be able to call Hosni Mubarak when problems arose. Notwithstanding his problematic authoritarianism at home, his 30-year tenure constituted the golden age of U.S.-Egyptian cooperation. But Mubarak has since been supplanted by the SCAF, the top brass of the Egyptian armed forces most predisposed to the United States. After thirty years of joint exercises, stateside training for the officer corps, and over \$35 billion in U.S. military assistance, however, just how much influence Washington has with the military remains unclear. At present, U.S. leverage with the SCAF appears modest at best.

Putting aside White House claims of responsibility for the Egyptian military exercising restraint during the revolution, it was a pragmatic decision: The generals simply feared conscripts wouldn't follow orders to shoot civilians. Likewise, SCAF efforts to calm recent tensions along the Israeli border after a series of bloody incidents are not the result of phone calls from the Pentagon, but are indicative of the military's predilection for self-preservation.

More telling of Washington's limited influence in Cairo has been the administration's failed attempts to sway the military leadership on the sequencing of presidential and parliamentary elections and constitution drafting. As currently configured by SCAF fiat -- legislative elections followed by writing the constitution, and then voting for the chief executive -- it is all but assured that Egypt's Islamists will have a leading hand in penning the new (presumably Islamist-sympathetic) charter.

While Egyptian officers clearly appreciate the benefits of military to military ties with Washington, the leverage derived from this relationship has been overstated. Simply put, the \$1.3 billion a year U.S. grant isn't what it used to be. When U.S. assistance started flowing back in 1981, the annual military grant equated to more than 5 percent of the state's GDP. In 2010, it stood at less than one-fourth of a percent. Given the relatively small amount of assistance, it is unlikely that U.S. attempts to condition this aid to politically difficult decisions would be successful. And Washington's influence in Cairo will become even more tenuous when (and if) the military eventually returns to the barracks.

That's because Washington's standing with Egyptian civilians isn't much better. Given the populist politics of post-revolution Egypt -- where legitimacy is derived in large part from not being like Mubarak, and close ties with the U.S. are considered a liability -- this dynamic is not likely to change anytime soon. While antipathy to the U.S. comes as little surprise from the Muslim Brotherhood and its harder-line Salafist cousins, seeing non-Islamists and pro-democracy "liberals" join the chorus has been a surreal, if not unexpected development.

Consider Ayman Nour, the pro-democracy attorney who had the temerity to challenge Mubarak in the 2005 presidential contest. Nour lost, and was later convicted -- fraudulently -- of fraud, prompting President Bush to call Mubarak out. Today, three years out of prison, Nour is advocating closer Egyptian ties with Washington's regional nemesis, Iran. Worse, Nour and former Arab League chief and current presidential frontrunner Amr Moussa have joined the Salafis in demanding the release from U.S. prison of Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, the blind cleric convicted of masterminding the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The government is also hostile to Washington. In late July -- taking a page from the Mubarak era anti-American official press -- the state-owned *October* magazine ran a cover story about the new U.S. envoy to Cairo titled "Ambassador from Hell." Just a month earlier, Cairo turned down a \$3 billion low-interest IMF loan with virtually no conditions attached, a decision seemingly predicated on a popular aversion to the United States: According to a Gallup Poll taken earlier this year, 75 percent of Egyptians oppose accepting U.S. economic assistance.

Unsurprisingly these anti-U.S. sentiments also carry over to the U.S.-brokered Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, a deal that Amr Moussa says "is over." Even the most "liberal" presidential hopeful, Mohamed ElBaradei, says that Egypt should consider going to war with Israel to protect Palestinians in Gaza.

Notwithstanding devoting more than 30 years and \$50 billion to secure the peace and build a strong bilateral relationship, during this critical moment of transition, Washington today finds itself with precious little influence in Egypt. For now, U.S. access to Cairo West airbase, priority Suez Canal access for U.S. warships, and routine military over flights of Egyptian airspace are not at risk. Despite the storming of the Israeli embassy in Cairo, neither is the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. If the current trajectory isn't reversed and the next government in Cairo doesn't start to value the bilateral relationship, however, these U.S. equities may soon be in jeopardy.

For the foreseeable future, the U.S. is likely going to punch below its weight in Cairo. Given its diminished influence, Washington would be best advised to prioritize judiciously.

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