

A Mighty Arsenal:

Egypt's Military Build-Up, 1979–1999

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Brief Analysis

Military aid will likely be a topic of discussion between Presidents Hosni Mubarak and Bill Clinton when the Egyptian leader visits Washington this week. Since Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979, Cairo has received \$35 billion in military and economic assistance from the United States. Cairo has used \$25 billion of that aid to build what is arguably the Arab world's most sophisticated armed force. Based on data provided by Military Balance, an annual publication of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the following describes how Egypt's conventional arsenal has grown over the last two decades. It should be noted that Egypt's impressive array of advanced weaponry offers little indication of potential performance on a future battlefield--actual wartime capability is a function of various factors that include training, leadership, and doctrine. A survey of Egypt's armed forces twenty years after the United States instituted its assistance program does, however, provide insight into how U.S. assistance has catalyzed Egypt's procurement of top-tier military hardware.

Ground Forces. Egypt has transformed its unwieldy, Soviet-equipped, infantry-based army into an armored-mechanized force outfitted with advanced U.S. weaponry. It has doubled its number of armored divisions from two to four and increased its number of mechanized divisions from three to eight, and at the same time it has trimmed its manpower by 30,000.

Improvements in the quality and quantity of Egypt's armored corps have been substantial. Egypt's arsenal of tanks has grown from 1,600 in 1979 to 3,855 in 1999, while the number of armored personnel carriers (APC) and armored infantry fighting vehicles (AIFV) has increased from 2,700 to 5,070. In 1979, Egypt could field some 850 low-quality (by the standards of the day) T-54/55 tanks, and some 750 medium-quality T-62s. By contrast, Egypt can now deploy 555 U.S. M1A1 main battle tanks--probably the most lethal and survivable tank on the battlefield today--as well as 1,300 upgraded M-60A3s of medium quality. Negotiations are pending for Egypt to receive an additional 200 M1A1s to be assembled in Egypt. Jane's Defence Weekly reported that to arm its tanks, Cairo has recently acquired 10,800 rounds of Smoothbore KEW-A1 ammunition, which was used by U.S. M1A1 crews in the Gulf War to destroy 4,000 Iraqi vehicles. Modern Western tanks of medium and high quality now constitute about 60 percent of the Egyptian order of battle.

Similarly, Egypt has significantly improved its field artillery. Egypt did not possess any self-propelled artillery in 1979; since then, 251 pieces have been integrated into its ground forces. Cairo has also acquired the AN/TPQ-37 artillery radar system, which will greatly enhance its ability to employ counter-battery fires. Likewise, Egypt has bolstered its anti-tank weaponry by acquiring 540 TOW-2B anti-tank missile launchers, French HOT-3 missiles, and 1,000 Hellfire-2 laser-guided anti-tank missiles, and it has purchased 50 mobile Avenger batteries that include Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

GROUND FORCES	1979	1999

Army Personnel	350,000	320,000
Tanks--Low Quality (T-54/55)	850	840
Tanks--Medium Quality (T-62,M-60A1/3, Ramses)	750	2,460
Tanks--High Quality (M1A1)	0	555
APCs and AIFVs	2,700	5,070
Artillery (Towed/Self-Propelled)	1,300/0	971/251

Air and Naval Forces. Egypt's capabilities in the air and at sea have increased dramatically since 1979 through qualitative improvements to its air and naval forces, without an appreciable increase in quantity. In 1979, Egypt's fleet of 563 combat aircraft almost exclusively consisted of Soviet planes, including large numbers of low-quality MiG-17s and medium quality MiG-21s, with a small number of more capable MiG-23s. U.S. military assistance financed an impressive transition to a modern, sophisticated air force. The centerpiece of Egyptian air power today is its fleet of 139 modern F-16s that can be used for interception, ground attack, and strike missions. While Egypt has acquired quality aircraft, it has also reduced the number of obsolete Soviet planes; MiG-17s, MiG-23s, Su-7s, and Su-20s have been eliminated from the force structure, and the number of MiG-21s have fallen from 208 in 1979 to 88 today. Egypt has also increased the number of transport helicopters, from 135 to 158, and has nearly doubled its attack helicopter fleet, from 54 to 105. Cairo has integrated thirty-six Apache attack helicopters into its order of battle, although its request for the highly advanced Longbow radar system has thus far been rejected by Washington.

Like its air force, Egypt has strengthened its navy considerably by replacing most of its aging Soviet vessels with more modern ships built in the West. Egypt has decommissioned eight obsolete Soviet submarines and had the United States outfit four of its remaining Romeo-class submarines with cutting-edge weapons systems that gave it the capability to launch underwater-to-surface Harpoon missiles. Egypt significantly improved its naval forces in 1996 with the acquisition of four modern Perry-class U.S. frigates, which are capable of over-the-horizon combat and anti-submarine warfare. Two more of these modern frigates are on order.

AIR AND NAVAL FORCES	1979	1999
Aircraft--Low Quality (J-6/7, MiG-17, Su-7, Tu-16, L-59E)	233	143
Aircraft--Medium Quality (Alpha Jet, F-4E Phantom, MiG-21/23, Mirage 5, Su-20)	330	241
Aircraft--High Quality (F-16, Mirage 2000)	0	199
Submarines	12	4
Frigates and Destroyers	8	11

Conclusion. Egypt's conventional weaponry in all areas--ground, air, and naval--has improved substantially since 1979. Owing to annual assistance from Washington, Egypt now possesses a modern force with advanced, up-to-date hardware of U.S. manufacture. Whether the Egyptians are able to employ its new sophisticated arsenal effectively remains difficult to gauge. What is clear is that U.S. aid will ensure that Egypt's military modernization program

continues.

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The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies (JCSS) offers its own account of Egypt's conventional weapons inventory. The following is a comparison of IISS and JCSS data:

	1979		1999	
	IISS	JCSS	IISS	JCSS
HARDWARE				
Tanks	1,600	2,100	3,853	4,462
APCs and AIFVs	2,700	2,300	5,070	5,033-5,083
Combat Aircraft	563	580	583	505
Frigates and Destroyers	8	8	11	11

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