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Brief History of
and Recommendations for
U.S.-Egypt Relations

Early Beginnings

On February 28, 1922, Egypt gained its independence from United Kingdom's protectorate. Under King Fu'ad I, Egypt began establishing foreign policy relations with the United States. The time periods spanning Ottoman and British rule over Egypt saw few chances to launch economic relations, so Egypt's independence signaled an opportunity to ignite them. A 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty further increased American economic and military assistance to Egypt. Since then, the preservation of this alliance has been a top priority for both nations.

According to the Embassy of Egypt in Washington D.C., relations between the two nations centers on a "mutual commitment" to "prosperity, peace, and stability in the Middle East." Facing the United Nations General Assembly, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi praised the "stable and strategic" alliance with the United States, while President Barack Obama stated that relations with the Arab state remain an "important cornerstone of our security policy." Egypt has helped advance a broad range of American interests including countering security threats in the region, promoting foreign investment, enhance productivity of the Suez Canal, and exchanging commercial and military trade.¹

Political relations reached significant heights when the United States was influential in keeping Presidents Gamal Abdel-Nasser (1952-1970), Anwar Sadat (1970-81), and Hosni

¹ "Egypt-U.S. Relations | Embassy of Egypt, Washington DC." *Embassy of Egypt Washington DC*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

Mubarak (1981-2011) in power. Though the latter two often repressed and subjected Egypt's populace, U.S. policy favored supporting military dictatorships, as they protected American and Israeli interests in Egypt and surrounding infrastructure. The Arab Spring of 2011 ended U.S. public support for Mubarak, but this change in policy may only be temporary, as Egypt attempts to reestablish its security under a new president.

Though the Arab Spring changed much of the dynamic in the alliance, the United States still wishes to maintain a close relationship with Egypt as a strategic military ally, a partner in peace in the Middle East, and a vital market for American exports.²

1950s

The 1950s saw the first major tension in political relations between the two nations since their formal establishment. President Gamal Abdel-Nasser's development of closer ties with the Soviet Union and Communist China during the 1950s raised suspicion among American political leaders. Egypt's recognition of China resulted in the United States' withdrawal of financial support for Nasser's Aswan Dam plan, but Nasser was able to complete the project with aid from the Soviet Union. Additionally, Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal deeply embittered the United States, who used the Canal for trade and strategic naval purposes. Ultimately, the American government acknowledged that tense relations with Egypt would negatively impact U.S. trade, military, and economic advances. Therefore, when Britain, Israel, and France invaded Egypt in attempt to seize the canal, the Eisenhower administration defended Egypt and used diplomatic and economic pressure to force Britain and France to withdraw its troops from the

² "U.S. Relations With Egypt." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 20 May 2014. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

region. Eisenhower's support of Egypt led to a warming of relations between the two nations, which lasted for more than two decades.³

1973-2011

It was not until the late 1970s, however, that the U.S. provided "significant military and economic assistance".⁴ Anwar Sadat's presidency during 1970 to 1981 led to peace agreements between Israel and Egypt, a political move that was much rewarded by the United States. President Jimmy Carter's role in the Camp David Accords was influential in enhancing American aid and grants to Egypt. Following the peace treaty, U.S. military aid between 1979 and 2003 amounted to \$19 billion, with an additional \$30 billion in economic grants in the same time period.⁵

Since 2001, however, the United States' relation with Egypt has grown tense. Egypt opposed the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2003, and refused to send troops to Afghanistan to aid American peace-stabilization efforts in the region.⁶ For more than two years, the United States attempted to promote a democratic transition in Egypt after a coup in 2011. A military takeover in July 2013 reestablished authoritarian rule under Abdel Fatah al Sisi and left American political leaders defeated. As instability and violence rises in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, U.S. relations with Egypt may become stressed and weakened.⁷

³ Burns, William J. "Punishing Nasser." In *Economic Aid and American Policy toward Egypt, 1955-1981*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.

⁴ Sharp, Jeremy M. "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations." *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations* (n.d.): 1-35. Congressional Research Service, 3 Mar. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

⁵ "President Mubarak's Visit to Washington." *Cable Viewer*. N.p., 19 May 2009. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

⁶ Hall, Mimi, and R. F. Wolf. "Transition Could Weaken U.S. Anti-terror Efforts - USATODAY.com." *USATODAY.COM*. N.p., 4 Feb. 2011. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

⁷ Sharp, p.6.

2011-Present

The U.S. has proceeded precariously in ensuring military and diplomatic ties without appearing tolerant of Egypt's military rule. In a speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in May 2014, President Obama acknowledged their unwillingness to cut off relations entirely, but stressed that American officials will "persistently press for the reforms that the Egyptian people have demanded."⁸

The establishment of a balance between morality and economic interests is delicate and can be easily broken. Opinions of how to secure Egypt's stability differ widely, and Obama (as well as the future president) must decide which paths lead to the greatest benefits for the largest amount of people.

Following the 2013 military coup, U.S. decreased military aid to Egypt, punishment for their human rights violations and forceful crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt's refusal to respect the right of protestors or grant political rights to many of its citizens have increasingly tensed relations between the two nations. To pressure the Egyptian government, the Obama administration withheld the delivery of tanks, helicopter and missiles in October 2013, stating they would not be released until "credible progress toward democracy" was made.⁹ However, terrorist attacks against Egypt and ongoing negotiations with Iran about nuclear technology have raised the need for Egypt to have weapons and defense at its disposal. Some lawmakers fear that America's weapons suspension will make Egypt weaker in defending itself from ISIS, and may cause resentment from the Egyptians.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sharp, p. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Concerns about restrictions on human rights and civil liberties have also been raised. The Protest Law, passed in November 2013, bans public gatherings larger than 10 people without police approval, and gives the police authority to ban protests on the charge of “threats to public order”. The Muslim Brotherhood has been named a terrorist organization, and many of its leaders were exiled or imprisoned, including Egypt’s former President Mohamed Morsi.¹¹ A June 2014 law allows the disqualification of any Parliamentary candidate that supports a “religiously-discriminatory organization”, a direct attack on the Muslim Brotherhood.¹²

Dissent against the Egyptian government is not tolerated. In August 2014, 1,150 protestors were killed after Egyptian security forces fire live ammunition against the demonstrators. In another example, three Al Jazeera journalists were each sentenced to seven years in prison for allegedly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³

As for 2016, President Barack Obama has filed for a \$1.3 billion military aid package to Egypt. In addition, Obama has asked Congress to allocated \$150 million in economic aid, the lowest amount of assistance to Egypt since 1978.¹⁴

Military and Economic Assistance

In the six decades between 1948 and 2015, the U.S. gave Egypt \$76 billion in foreign aid (not accounting for inflation), \$1.3 billion of which consisted of military aid. Egypt’s importance to the United States is largely based on national security, as Egypt occupies important geographic and demographic lands. Their control of the Suez Canal also heightens the need for solid diplomatic relations, as the U.S. Navy and 8% of all global sea shipments rely on the Canal

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹² Ibid., p. 10.

¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

for economic and military positions. Egypt's 83 million citizens make it the largest Arab nation and a strategic location for the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo.¹⁵

Despite their political importance, some American political leaders are weary of the future of the bilateral relations. Operation Desert Storm in 1991 was the last significant joint military operations between the two nations, and the September 11 attacks strained relations when it was discovered that several of the original core al-Qaeda leaders were prominent Egyptian extremists.¹⁶

Egypt's Economy after Arab Spring

The nature of American support to Egypt has shifted throughout the decades. As Egypt established peace relations with Israel, U.S. aid was largely used to modernize Egypt's infrastructure, particularly investing in sewer and telecommunications systems, and erecting schools and medical institutions. By the 1990s, however, the United States changed their method of assistance, choosing to emphasize "trade not aid." In 1994, the U.S.-Egypt Partnership for Economic Growth was established to foster trade between the nations and encourage the growth of Egypt's private industries.¹⁷

The two nations currently trade large amounts and varieties of goods, resources, and materials. U.S. exports to Egypt include wheat and corn, machinery, aircrafts, and oil. In return, Egypt exports cotton apparel, fertilizer, and natural gas.¹⁸ The United States' massive trading

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁸ *U.S. Department of State.*

relations with Egypt have made it the Arab nation's largest single trading partner, with total goods exchanged valued at \$6.8 billion in 2013.¹⁹

Despite fears of impending Egyptian financial crisis on the eve of the July 2013 coup, the Gulf Arab monarchies have provided much economic aid to prevent instability in Egypt. In less than two years, the Gulf States—most notably the UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia—have given \$20 billion in grants, loans, and oil, in addition to billion-dollar investments in Egypt's private sector.²⁰ Aside from providing Egypt \$76 billion in foreign aid since 1948, the United States has also provided the nation with military assistance and weapons systems to enhance regional stability.²¹ To date, the U.S. has sent over one thousand M1A1 tanks, 224 F-16 aircrafts, and 45 Apache Longbow helicopters.²²

Future Recommendations

The current relation with the United States revolves around a mutual desire for a stable and peaceful Middle East and strengthening the Egyptian economy. Future relations between the two nations will largely depend on the outcome of Egypt's transition to democracy as a result of the Arab Spring. Supporting illegitimate governments led by repressive leaders may lead the global community to question American sincerity and commitment to the establishment and preservation of democracy, human rights, economic freedom, and security.

The United States' future foreign policy toward Egypt should be centered around three specific goals: 1) making economic and military aid dependent upon Egypt's degree of protection of human rights; 2) closely monitoring Egypt's spending of American aid to ensure

¹⁹ *Embassy of Egypt Washington DC.*

²⁰ Sharp, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 21-22.

proper usage and distribution of funds; and 3) encouraging the flow of tourism and education between the two nations, particularly by promoting study abroad and student exchange programs at secondary and university levels, such as the American University in Cairo.

U.S. policy needs to guide Egypt in ensuring a successful democratic transition and the protection of human rights for its citizens. American political leaders should support Egypt's efforts to introduce accountability in their government, secure civil liberties, stimulate the economy, and develop a democratic and independent civil society.²³ A continue friendship based on mutual respect and trust between the two nations will result in the emergence of significant political and economic opportunities that benefit the citizens, businesses, and governments of both.

²³ *U.S. Department of State.*

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