

## **Russian Arms to Egypt...Egyptian Messages to the United States**

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Before the popular movement that toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February, 2011, Egyptian-American relations had revolved around an axis of strategic cooperation, consultation, and coordination. They had also been considered most enduring and unchanging, having begun in earnest in the aftermath of the Egyptian strategic shift away from the Soviet Union in the later part of the 1970s. Indeed, the launch of the United States-Egyptian relationship was then a watershed in Cold War politics and a major gain for American foreign policy.

But since 2011, and Washington's acceptance of political change in Cairo that allowed for legitimately electing Islamist President Mohammad Morsi, the fundamentals and dynamics of the old relationship have experienced painful changes for both sides. As the same relationship today witnesses inevitable flux and uncertainty, it is likely to have longstanding impacts on both countries, on their respective strategic outlooks, and on third parties in the region -those relying on good US-Egyptian relations, and those wanting to exploit potential rifts and misunderstandings for their own benefit.

### **The New Arms Deals and the American Response**

The American critical response to the Egyptian army's takeover of government in July, 2013, dampened political and military relations between the United States and Egypt. While Washington was not so

impressed with former President Mohammad Morsi's governing style, or with the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda, it considered the Egyptian military's move as an outright coup against a duly elected civilian leadership and a violation of the spirit of non-interference in politics. Subsequently, political coordination between Washington and Cairo suffered as military assistance and relations were suspended pending developments in Egypt and a return to democratic politics.

In response, and in need of powerful international allies, the new Egyptian caretaker government of Dr. Hazem al-Beblawi sought to secure alternative sources of weapons that would help it fight an extremist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula and Egyptian cities as well as maintain a qualitative edge as extremist groups spread in Libya and other parts of northern Africa. In a visit to Moscow in February, 2014, Army Chief and Defense Minister, Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi, signed a Saudi Arabian-underwritten arms deal worth US\$2 billion that contained the purchase of Russian MIG-29s, Mi-35 helicopters, ammunition, and anti-ship weapons.



Presidents Putin and al-Sisi in Russia last summer

In August of 2014, now-President al-Sisi visited Russia where he was received with much aplomb as the Russian Federation sought to expand its weapons market share in the Middle East. Reports emerged in

September that negotiations included an arms deal worth US\$3.5 billion to include delivery of air defense systems, combat aircraft, anti-tank missiles, and armor. Other reports spoke of the possibility of Egypt's purchasing the advanced MIG-35 fighter aircraft, considered to be superior to the American F-16 which Egypt also possesses.



The American and Egyptian delegations meeting in New York last September

But developments since the spring of 2014 have shown an American gradual but positive change of heart toward the old ally. Practically in response to the new Egyptian overture to Russia in February, the US Department of State certified to Congress Egypt's meeting conditions attached to the Fiscal Year 2014 appropriation of US\$1.3 billion in military aid and US\$250 million in economic assistance. The conditions included Egypt's sustaining its strategic relationship with the United States, its commitment to peace with Israel, and its progress towards democratic government. By June, 2014, military and economic aid was restored. In October of this year, the United States also allowed the delivery of 10 Apache attack helicopters to the Egyptian armed forces.

### **Egyptian Messages to the United States**

As instances in aggressive foreign policy behavior, Egypt's new arms deals with

Russia cannot be isolated from the general coolness that characterized US-Egyptian relations over the last few years. Specifically, and in addition to filling perceived gaps in its arms arsenal, Egypt sought to send several messages to the United States.

First, and although Egyptian policy orientation had never been completely in line with United States policy, the arms deals were obviously an occasion to assert an independent stance as the new army-backed government tried to appear strong and in control of its domestic and external agendas. In this, the Sisi Administration is no different from any other that followed a direct military intervention at times of domestic turmoil. In fact, American criticism of the army's takeover was considered interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country and dismissed as ignorant of the conditions preceding the action by the armed forces.

Second, cognizant that it needed international support as it suppressed domestic Islamist opposition and fought extremist groups, the Egyptian government correctly calculated that Vladimir Putin's Russia would provide the necessary foreign vindication that could ameliorate the negative impact of American criticism. From its side, Russia realized that opening up its weapons arsenal to Egypt can serve many purposes: increase its arms exports, establish friendly relations with an Arab government besides Syria's, and intrude on America's sphere of influence, to name a few.

Third, Egypt's message to the United States was also a message from important members of the Gulf Cooperation Council who had trepidations about the American intention to re-balance to the Asia-Pacific theatre and US policy toward Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. As

conduit, Egypt was happy to oblige its Saudi Arabian and Emirati allies who, along with Kuwait, had underwritten the post-July, 2013, government with US\$12 billion in direct assistance.

Fourth, Egypt's message was of strategic importance to the United States about the folly of antagonizing the Arab world's largest country and strongest military institution as it, the United States, was courting Iran and seeking to rehabilitate it in the region and internationally. In that, Egypt was not alone. Arab Gulf leaders have since the 1970s considered Egypt their best regional strategic ally. With Iraq out of the picture and unable to free itself of inordinate Iranian influence, none other than Egypt can help protect the Arabian Gulf and Peninsula. Consequently, any American criticism was to be defiantly faced until the United States understands Egypt's importance to the strategic posture of the Arabian Gulf and the Arab world at large.

### **The Potential Way Forward**

Looking ahead, American-Egyptian relations are likely to show the following trends:

1. Continuing Egyptian attempts at showing independence in foreign policy decisions as well as autonomy in managing domestic politics, especially those related to the democratic transition promised and the treatment of the internal Islamist opposition. As to the fight against violent extremists inside Egypt, the United States will continue to support the Egyptian government's security agenda since internal violence feeds, and feeds off, wider trends in northern African countries.
2. A concerted American effort to repair relations with Egypt and re-

emphasize its importance to United States strategic objectives, including those regarding the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel. President Barack Obama's meeting with President Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi at the United Nations' 69<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in New York in September was a step in that direction. Since al-Sisi's election in June, the US Administration has re-affirmed its belief that Egypt represents an essential element for peace and security in the Arab world and the Middle East. However, the administration will continue to advocate for positive democratic change, free parliamentary elections, freedoms of speech and assembly, and release of political prisoners, among others.

3. Egypt has so far not figured prominently in the regional and international military effort against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). But as the coalition against ISIS is cemented and strengthened, and if developments change on the ground in Iraq and threaten Saudi Arabia, Egypt might get involved militarily. It also might need to contribute ground troops to defend Saudi territory against ISIS incursions from Iraq. In both cases, there will be additional need for more coordination with the United States.
4. Similarly, more US-Egyptian cooperation and coordination will be likely if conditions in Libya worsened. Moreover, and as the United States accepts its limited influence in that country, Egypt may in the future be assumed to lead regional and international efforts to

help change conditions on the ground there.

5. Finally, as Yemen's Houthis succeed in establishing themselves on the shores of the Red Sea and potentially threaten shipping lanes, Egypt may be regarded as a country of strategic reserve should the need arise to challenge the Houthis and their backer, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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Images accessed 10/24/2014

Putin-Sisi image at

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/111008/Business/Economy/Russia,-Egypt-seal-preliminary-arms-deal-worth--bi.aspx>

US-Egypt NY meeting at

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/09/25/president-obama-meets-president-egypt>